

The Wind Will Howl Your Name

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The Wind Will Howl Your Name

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Summary

After a hunt goes wrong, John finds himself in the care of Ghost.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The snow beneath his feet was deep, annoyingly so as he trekked further amongst the barren trees, ice frozen to their thick branches and icicles sharp and glistening. John hated the winter, it wasn't even just a case of being honest. The cold was a brutal mistress, sinking into his skin and dragging claws along his flesh; biting fangs into his exposed cheeks where her sister wind caressed and kissed.

He wasn't out here per choice - the harvest this year had been wholly unkind and the grains were nearly run through. It would be another month before the thaw would come and relieve them of their frozen hell.

It wouldn't be enough, even if they rationed.

A few of them had gathered 'round in the early morning. There were more than a few hunters among them, despite the small size of the village. John was one of the younger fellows of the group, but he wasn't a stranger to doin' his part. They'd all set off in different directions, John taking to the northern trail that led up towards the mountains. It was just a matter of finding anything out here, is all.

He'd mostly stuck to the path, eyes searching for tracks that weren't smoothed over by wind before he'd found a cut in the snow that led off the trail - deer prints. He'd turned back for a moment to face the village in the long distance, plumes of smoke billowing from chimneys amongst the backdrop of fields before making the call. There was no telling just how fresh they were, other than maybe a day's worth if he were unlucky - but a deer could feed them for a few days if it were fat enough.

Be a bit of a bitch to drag back, though.

He'd set off the path with nothing but a hope that that would be the most of his worries, following the zigzagging path as he sunk deeper into the trees, eyes ever searching for a sign of a light brown coat amongst the bark.

It wasn't until dusk began to set in, the chill burying into his bones with a tremor that he began to lose faith. It would be well into

nightfall by the time he made it back to the trail now, and he bloody well had nothin' to show for it. He curses into the frigid air, watching the hiss of breath catch on the wind before it bleeds into nothing. He'd have to double back then, with nothing to do but keep scout should some unfortunate bastard wander across him - Pray some of the other hunters had managed a catch if he should still be so luckless.

He's a quarter turned before his ears snag on the faintest of sounds, an echoing crunch of snow nearly lost to the song of a calling owl. A jutting cut of stone stands to his right, a cropping of bare underbrush nestled along its base that obscures his view, but he knows the noise hadn't traveled from much farther beyond that. As quiet as he can muster, he creeps slowly towards the scrub, drawing an arrow from his quiver and settling the nock snug against the string.

He holds his breath as he peers around the rocks and through entwining twigs, spotting the doe as she paws at the ground, digging for whatever was left of the vegetation beneath. Her eyes don't catch his movement, but he can see the way her ears twitch in his direction that he was on borrowed time. The angle is bad but he has a fear that a misplaced shuffle would send her to scatter. With a grit of his teeth, there isn't much left for him to do but take his chances.

He lets out his breath, a shaky thing, eyes down sight as he pulls the bow taut. The doe's head perks, wide black eyes staring him down unseeing from where he lay amongst the brambles, chewing the deadened grass. He lets her calm, lower her head back to nip against the ground before he releases the arrow. It sails soundlessly, a startling contrast from the thunk of it piercing through skull and the lazy answer of the body dropping, unmoving.

He grins wildly at his triumph as he scrambles to go collect his prize. It was smaller than he had allowed himself to hope for, but coupled with a few other successful hunts they would be steady for a bit. He kneels down beside the doe, taking in the way the eyes peer into the world with no life behind it and allows himself to feel a sort of pity for the poor thing.

"Ye won't go to waste, pretty girl," He whispers, brushing a thumb down her snout before yanking the arrow out from below her ear. He doesn't quite apologize, hard to be sorry when the only other option is starving to death, but he supposes it was still a loss of life - just a different kind.

He makes quick work of binding the doe for carry, night was crawling

in fast now, before heaving her as best he could over his shoulders. It was uncomfortable with his quiver and bow squashed against his spine, but he would make do.

He begins the long haul back towards the trail, running calculations through his mind as he hums a folk tune. He'd probably spent the better half of the day hiking from off trail, not to mention the walk back down once he found it. It would be worth the trouble, of course, once the poor deer had been gutted and portioned, but he was still looking at a hell of a stretch - With extra load to boot, not that he wasn't pleased about that. He'd thank his lucky stars that he kept to staying on the fitter side of things, or else tonight would have been a special kind of hell.

He thinks he's making good time, the corpse bled of warmth by now but the exercise keeping him from succumbing to the frigid air, when a feeling of wrongness settles somewhere deep in the pit of his belly. The night was unforgiving in the veil of black that had siphoned away the light of the moon, clouds heavy overhead with what John hoped was a storm saved for morning. He hadn't missed how the winds had picked up to the point of nearly howling, knocking ice from the branches above with the way it rattled them. He'd been keeping his eyes overhead, lest a stray bit make way to cleave his head open, and hadn't been paying much attention to his other surroundings - but he could feel the way the night was closing in now.

He picked up his pace.

Panting, he listens around him. He was making an awful lot of noise for someone so deep in the woods, alone, and try as he might to calm fear that was clamping down on him he couldn't shake the feeling of *something*. He couldn't go much faster.

The resounding crack that reverberates behind him makes him still, heaving as he stares wide eyed beyond him. There's another crack, a rustle of deadened twigs and he free's a hand to grasp at the hilt of his hunting knife, the deer sagging awkwardly down his back. Slowly, carefully, he turns - begging the night to be kind enough the sight to see anything beyond a few feet in front of him.

The night is not his ally as he searches, too dark and too many shadows stretching across the earth to find whatever had made that noise. A sound to his left makes him twist, the brush too dense to see properly but he holds the knife steady in front of him. It had to be a hell of a beast to be making that kind of racket.

He makes a show of taking a slow step backwards, and then another, his heart thundering in his chest, thudding in his ears. He's about to take another, hightail the hell out of there when a yowl holds him still.

He can see it out of the corner of his peripheral now, the slinking mass that steps from between the trees. He tilts his head towards it, the mountain lion that stalks low to the ground, teeth bared and eyes challenging. It yowls again, a warning maybe.

"Bloody fuckin' hell," He curses, voice low. How long had the damn thing been stalking him, the blood dried now but the scent surely clinging to them as he had spent all his damn time worryin' about ice? The bastard was absolutely massive.

It'd be a loss, but he'd have to toss the deer - hope the corpse was enough to sate the beast while he made a booking for it. The snow was thicker here, but hopefully a peace offering would be enough. Slowly, he shucks the ropes, laying the deer down gently behind him. The mountain lion doesn't even take its eyes off him, stalking closer even as he fumbles to keep out of reach.

"Aight ye fuckin' cunt," He murmurs, adjusting the hold on his knife. "Dinnae have to even work for it, now did ye? Piss right off then."

He jerks his head towards the doe, but the lion shows no interest in an easy meal.

"Git oan wae it," he whines, baring his own teeth as the lion lets out an angry, drawn out wail, swiping at him and nearly catching his thigh. He thrashes his knife out, swinging wildly in an attempt to deter the damn beast but the movement only makes it angrier. It keeps him in a close game of cat and mouse, swatting and stalking as he blindly backs away. He keeps the knife between them, though he doesn't know how much good it will do against the damn thing.

He's caught between a curse and a prayer when the back of his heel catches on a fallen branch. Wildly, he looks away to jerk his boot from the jagged limb - which is enough of a distraction that he can do little to redirect the claws that sink across his ribs, tearing deep along the bone and through the tender flesh of his belly. He cries out and gives under the weight of the beast moving in, wrist smacking painfully against the trunk of a tree and sending the hunting knife from his grasp.

He fumbles blindly for it as his other hand pushes away the jaw that

snaps and froths, pain a secondary concern even as he feels the blood seep its sticky warmth into the greedy, hungry linen that covers him under his winter pelt. Adrenaline keeps him fighting, but somewhere outside of himself, the part that is wholly human and mortal, he knows he's dying. Knows that he's too far from home with too much blood to bleed. Knows that the storm in the morning will keep any eyes blind from seeing that he doesn't return, and by the time someone does notice, his tracks will be buried and lost.

John is aware he's dying, but he knows he won't go out anything less than as though he was coming out of it alive.

He gives up on the damn knife, bringing a fist to knock mercilessly against the eye socket of the animal. It howls in its anger, twisting its head about as though it can't decide whether to shake off the blow or bite at the fist that rears back again to hammer down against its snout. The hit snaps its jaws with a clack, and John brings up his knee to dig into the flesh of its rib cage.

He tries to pry the bastard back, really he does, but he's losing far too much blood far too quickly to keep much strength behind it. His heartbeat is a rapid, throbbing sound deep in his skull and he knows his panic, for all its push behind his fight, is just feeding into the wound. Black, darker than the shadows of the night, is beginning to creep along the corners of his sight, spotting in and out.

The lion writhes against where he barely holds it at bay, his strength ebbing with each flicker of his vision. The jaws lunge for him, inching close enough that he can only breathe in its rancid breath.

He knows his fight is nearly done. It was only a matter of when.

His arms tremble from exertion and his kicks are too little to even affect the lion now. In a strangely calm train of thought, John wonders if it would truly even hurt to give in. There would be no peace for his final moments, not so long as this beast still wanted him. He wonders if it would be worth it to spend the last of his life in struggle.

John feels his eyes close without much thought as to why, and feels his arms sag against the weight he had been trying so desperately to fight.

There's an agonizing stretch of time, between the last of his strength giving away and the wait for teeth to sink in and tear his skin.

But he waits.

The sound that causes John's eyes to flutter back open in fuzzy confusion is akin to the heavy hand of a butcher's cleaver, a sickening thud of meat and marrow. He can't see much beyond a face full of jagged teeth, but he feels a new soak of warmth along his shoulder.

His mind is dull, slow and stumbling as the releasing squelch echoes high into the tree tops. The heavy weight he had been fighting not moments ago seems to double as the lion topples on top of him, head lolling to the side and giving John an eyeful of its thick neck nearly halved from its body.

A boot thuds heavily into the lion's ribs, kicking the rotten bastard over until its lifeless corpse rolls off of him.

John feels strangely cold without it.

He follows the boot up a seemingly endless expanse of leg, over the broad chest of a hulk more giant than man. It's not a face that peers down at him, not one made of flesh anyway but rather bone. The piercing white of the front of a skull, the rest hidden under black cloth.

John has heard legends before, of the grim reaper coming to collect his dues when a poor sod like himself is at death's door. But for all the tales, he doesn't think he's ever quite heard one where the reaper had traded his scythe for an axe and was built thicker than an ox. A small trivial detail, but at least they had gotten the imposing part right.

The reaper makes no movement, doesn't utter a sound. In his hazy mind he supposes it makes sense. There isn't a job to do until he's dead.

"Dun suppose you'd be willin' to overlook this one, aye?" He slurs, or he tries to, unsticking his tongue from the roof of his mouth and floundering around the words.

He doesn't get a reply, but through lids that fight to both open and close, he knows the giant had bent down. He feels more than watches as his pelt is peeled away from his skin, not having the energy to even wince at the prickle of pain as the blood unsticks from the tender wound.

"Guess not," he murmurs.

When his eyes slip close for the final time, his last sight is of two dark eyes peering down at him. He thinks about how strange it was that a reaper should be gifted with one's so pretty.

He remembers nothing after that.

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'*It's blistering hot*' is John's first coherent thought, a stark contrast to the muddled flurry of vague concepts that hang on the fringe of both dreams and nightmares.

A heavy weight presses down all around him, a stifling maze as he tries and fails to push off the wretched trap he's become entangled in. His forehead is sticky with sweat as he struggles to pry his arm free to swipe at it, hand a kindling against the fire of his skin. '*A fever,*' he notes amongst the delirium, arm flopping back down beside him.

It's the last thought before he's lost again, clinging to the back of his mind as he wades through visions of lions and reapers and axes and does.

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He dreams of spring. Of waking to the interior of his cabin that lays on the fringe of the village before it bleeds to him underneath the radiant sun, warm against his skin as he tends the soil of Price's farm. He dreams of sweat gathering at the base of his neck, the dirt clinging to his hands but when he goes to wipe the grit from his palms he finds them stripped of skin and muscle, bone yellowed and cracked with age.

The alarm that rattles through him turns to confusion as Price's voice calls from the barn, however when he twists where he stands he finds not Price, but another. A ghastly form that changes and molds even under the weight of his stare; A being more wisp than man.

But even as it shifts, one part remains - a skull without jaw, eyes sunken deep within its sockets. It moves, caught between a transition of close and far and lingering in the middle distance, as though its existence were a flickering flame, lost from its wick and fleeing to find a place to catch.

Somehow, the place it decides to ignite and burn settles just beyond John's grasp. He stumbles, reaches for it without intention but it flickers away again, his fingertips grazing smoke. It disappears so

quickly John would think it a ghost.

It doesn't come back.

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When he comes to again, it's to soft shadows flickering against the walls, a fireplace dim where a log cackles and burns. A howl of wind batters against the simple, single room cabin and through the iced over windows, John can barely make out the furious gale of ice and snow that churns just beyond it. His body feels heavy and damp, the lingering remains of sweat sticking the furs laid upon him to his skin. The room is empty save for the organized clutter that lines the walls, homely and strange all at once.

John is alone.

He kicks back the furs in an attempt to rid himself of the blasted heat that is choking him. The movement reminds him of many things, namely the injury that takes up much of his torso and he chokes as he feels the cuts shift and split as he tries to sit up. He doesn't make it far before his resolve sputters out, flopping back against the meager pillow out of breath.

As the pain subsides, he looks down to where the makeshift bandages wrap around most of his bare belly and chest, the cloth stained with dried blood nearly black in the meager light of the room. He would need new ones if he had splintered open the scabs, which he was sure was the most likely outcome to his useless fidgeting.

His face feels hot to the touch as he runs his fingers across it, and he sluggishly recalls the fever. It hadn't quite broken yet, if the ache in his joints was anything to go by, but he knew it was well on its way out.

He scratches over the stubble of his chin as his eyes flicker around the room, taking in the various objects, the fur pelt on the floor as a makeshift rug. By the door he spots his quiver and bow, although the wood is splintered and halved. He mourns the loss but reckons he could maybe find a way to salvage it.

He finally catches the sight of a waterskin graciously left by the bedside, reminding him of the way his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth, uncomfortable and dry. It's a struggle to reach it, and even worse to find a position where most of it doesn't end up on the bed but he manages, drinking greedily until the pouch is empty and limp.

He places it back as carefully as he can manage, hoping the owner won't mind, before he settles back down with a sigh. He can't begin to imagine where he is, or where the keeper of the cabin could even be with the rage that thrashes about outside. He vaguely recalls his earlier delusions, and wonders if it was the man who had kept him or if he had brought him to the shelter of another. As John's consciousness begins to ebb and flow away from him again, he reckons he'll owe him his thanks either way.

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When he awakens for the third time, John realizes he isn't alone this time.

The storm still bats against the window, but it had calmed considerably into a light squall, nothing at all like it had been the last time he had awoken. A rustle of movement jostles on the fringe of his peripheral and he lulls his head to catch it, quietly taking in the man that sits on the rug, slicing a hunk of meat into smaller portions and adding them methodically into a pot on the floor.

He doesn't acknowledge John, whether because he thinks he's not awake or because he doesn't care. He's fully dedicated to his task at hand, and John takes the time to take him in.

Strangely, he's still wearing the skull, the rest of his head wrapped in black cloth, hiding his features. The only thing left uncovered about him at all really are his eyes and the hands that are at work, and John only knows about his eyes because he had seen them before. Right now they are hidden deep within the sockets of the mask, turned away from him.

John's mouth feels like it's full of cotton again, and he glances to find the waterskin still placed by the bedside, although it had seemingly come to be full and plump again. His eyes flick between it and his host, not wanting to disrupt the man or potentially startle him. If he's being honest, he doesn't right know what kind of situation he's in, although he can bargain with himself that the fellow probably didn't save him just to axe him the moment he woke up.

He clears his throat, a timid trade with himself, and watches as the man's hands still for only a moment before they go back to work, the only acknowledgment that he had heard John at all. He clears his throat again, unsticking his tongue and attempting once again to sit up. He grits his teeth, wincing at the pull of his wounds, but manages

to make his way up with only a bit of struggle, huffing as he settles his back against the crude wall behind him.

When he looks over again the man has stopped his cooking, eyes indecipherable, assessing John and seemingly had been since his struggle had started. John smiles sheepishly at him, grunting as he reaches for the waterskin and awkwardly raising it in a sense of cheers. The man simply turns away from him again.

John drinks, grateful for the cool water as it slides down his parched throat. In his eagerness to down the drink, a rivulet escapes the corner of his mouth, beading on his chin. He swipes at it before capping the pouch again, and sets it back on the floor beside him before turning back towards his silent companion.

Conversation wasn't John's strongest quality, or so he'd been told anyway. Usually just sayin' whatever the hell was on his mind whenever it came to it. He'd never had much tact, and he didn't really believe in startin' now. With the man offering nothing in his place, John didn't have much choice but to fill the empty space.

"Dae ye hiv a name?" He asks. He has enough shame to know that it's probably not the best way to start, but if he was gonna thank him, he wanted to do it properly.

The mask tilts slightly in his direction, but not enough that John can see beyond the black inside of it. He doesn't know why he had hoped for something different, but he isn't deigned with a response. It's a bit rude, actually.

When enough time passes that the room has settled a little too awkwardly, John tries again.

"Ye do have a name?" He questions, drawing out the syllables slowly. Maybe the man didn't speak his language, or heaven maybe he was mute. John couldn't be sure when the man made no indication of anything else.

Still, silence only greets him after he speaks, and John winces at the communication barrier. It would make things difficult, sure, but he'd just have to manage. Either way, even if the man didn't understand him or whatever that barrier was, John was raised better than to quit now.

"Aight, well. Either way ye have my thanks. I was a right goner til ye turned up," He laughs lightly to ease some of the tension out of the

air, and subsequently his chest as the man turns fully to look at him. His eyes give nothing away, the stare sharp enough to cut with how deeply they pierce into John. He doesn't know what it means, can only stare back with an awkward small smile, hoping to convey that he appreciated the help more than he was thrown by gaze.

After a long moment, the man turns away with a grunt, the only tell that he had understood John at all.

John counted his victories where he could, and watched him as he hefted the pot onto a rod over the fire, setting the meal to cook while they settled back into silence. With nothing to do and no conversation to sate him, John let his mind wander around the mystery of the man. He had so many questions to voice, with really no hope that he'd ever get a response to them. The main thing that tugged at him was the whole name situation. He needed something to call him.

He tosses a number of ideas to the side as the soup begins to boil, its aroma wafting through the air and filling the cabin. He feels his stomach grumble and sheepishly doesn't meet the eyes that turn his way again. It had been god knows how long since he'd had a meal to eat, and he wasn't about to assume that any of the pot had his name on it. He'd already taken the man's only bed, dirtied his cloth, and drank his water. Despite the wound, John didn't want to overstay his welcome, and didn't even expect that he *was* welcome.

His thoughts turn to how he was gonna go about getting home. It'd be a bitch, but he figured if the storm let up sometime in the morning he'd be able to set off. He'd at the least make it by nightfall, depending on how far away the cabin was from the village. Then he'd go about getting stitched up by the doc, and hopefully be in good enough shape come Spring to help Price with the farm like he did every year. It had become routine for them, and he knew how much Price depended on him.

He's so lost in thought, tossing between names and thoughts of the village, that he doesn't notice when the soup is done. It's only when a bowl of it is thrust under his nose that he jolts, looking between the meal and the eyes of the man that holds it out to him, confused. When he doesn't take it right away, he watches as the eyes tighten in annoyance, shaking the bowl in front of him as if to say "*Are you gonna take it?*"

John scrambles to gingerly wrap his hands around the bowl, not missing the way the hand retracts violently from where his fingers had

grazed it. He goes to smile at the man in apology, but finds him already going about ladling his own portion before settling back on the rug with his back turned to John.

“Aye, thanks,” He murmurs instead, helping himself slowly and blowing across the steaming bowl in an effort to cool it faster. He burns his tongue when he makes to sip the broth anyway, but can’t be damned enough to wait. As he gingerly brings the spoon to his mouth, his eyes flicker to where the man sits, the partial skull sitting at his side while he hunches over. John can tell from the way the cloth is situated that at least part of his face is free, and he can’t help but wonder why he doesn’t just take it off.

He sighs before his mouth can spout off any more nonsense and leaves the man well enough alone. It was none of John’s business anyway.

After the meal, the man leaves again without so much as a word. As the door shuts behind him, catching on a whistle of wind before it closes, John wonders if this was a habit of his - always coming and going despite a stranger lingering behind in his cabin. As though he were haunting the place instead of actually living in it.

‘Like a ghost,’ he thinks, before a small smile stretches across his lips. That would make a perfect name for him.

Ghost.

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As Ghost disappears, John sleeps, his body needing the rest as it went about working through his healing. He would need it if he were expecting to make the trip back home once the storm petered out. He isn’t roused again until the soft shut of a door alerts him to one of Ghost’s returns, hauling in a bundle of firewood that he dumps unceremoniously on the floor next to the fireplace, sending it to scatter.

“Welcome back,” He mutters groggily, rubbing at the crust sticking to the corners of his eyes and yawning.

Ghost looks at him briefly, but doesn’t say anything before flopping back onto the floor, pulling a knife from somewhere under a black, makeshift cape that still had snow clinging to its cloth, melting rapidly now in the heat of the cabin. He pulls the smallest and shortest log to him, and sets to work stripping it of its bark, flicking the pieces into the fire as he goes.

John watches him work and notes how methodical his movements always seem to be. Precise, as though he had done each action a thousand times. It's strangely calming to witness his process, and with sleep still clinging to the back of his mind, John nearly gives in to the sound of the knife whittling through the wood. From the rough shape of it, he can't tell quite what the man is carving just yet, but he'd never done the craft himself and couldn't help but be a little curious.

If he cares that John is watching, he doesn't make a show of it, carving each strip and tossing the slivers away before going back to it, over and over again until a rough shape begins to take form. John can't help but think he would have sliced off his thumb by now, with how clumsy he tended to be with smaller, more delicate things like this. His hands weren't made for the finer craft of things, but somehow Ghost's were, despite how much larger they looked than John's. He wondered if Ghost would mind teaching him before he shook his head of the idea. He had done him enough favors.

He turns from Ghost to look out the window. Night had fallen long before John had woken, and he was lost to the time of things as it were, but now that John was awake again he was presented with a new problem.

He needed to fuckin' piss.

Moving was already difficult, and he hadn't made sight of what had necessarily happened to his clothes, stripped of everything except his undergarments. He does a cursory look around the room in search of them, but finds not a hint of familiar cloth in any of the corners. He sits up with a groan as his wounds sting and curse him for his movement, noting how the sound of stripping wood halts just long enough until he gets his bearings.

When he looks over at Ghost, he is back to his task like he had never even stopped, but his face is turned away from him again. John pulls the furs close and over his lap, as though to hide even a sliver of his modesty. "Aight well, what have ye done with my clothes?" He asks, hoping he doesn't come across as impolite.

Ghost looks over at him then, pointedly dropping his gaze to where the bandages wrap around his chest, before looking up at him with a blank stare. John doesn't know if he's asking him to clarify or if he doesn't even understand what he's asking.

"Need ta piss, and I ain't goin' out there like this," He says sheepishly,

rubbing the back of his neck and jutting his chin back to where the window sits frozen over, frost and the shadow of night hiding anything outside from view.

Ghost makes a grunt of acknowledgement, understanding maybe, and jerks his head towards a lone chamberpot in the corner of the room, hidden deep into the shadows where the firelight barely has the strength to reach. John feels a swell of embarrassment at the prospect of what the other is asking him to do, and shakes his head.

“Think I’ll take my chances with the snow, mate.” He mutters sheepishly.

Ghost huffs, and from the quick shine of his eyes John thinks he had maybe rolled them at him before his hulking form is uncurling from the fire, standing up and looking down at John pointedly, annoyed, before he stomps across the room. He unsticks the door - a flurry of snowflakes engulfing him, wind whipping in like greedy hands seeking to steal whatever warmth the meager fire had gifted them - before slamming the door shut behind him, gone.

John sits still for a moment, running a hand across the stiff muscles of his neck and wincing as a particularly loud howl whistles through the silence of the cabin. He hadn’t bloody told the bugger to fuck off, now had he? But what was done was done and John wasn’t a fuckin’ mind reader. No tellin’ when the giant would come lumbering back in.

It’s a struggle to stand, his legs wobbly from disuse and the action leaving him breathless, but he manages to stumble across the room, taking extra steps to avoid the knife and project that lay in his path. He makes quick use of the chamberpot, wrinkling his nose at the way the sound fills the room. It was still awkward, even without Ghost at his back, and there was still the mystery of what had happened to his clothes. With nothing but his undergarments he felt right bloody fuckin’ naked. He was well enough now that there wasn’t an excuse for it, no matter how many furs and pelts were piled on the bed. As a secondary thought, he’d also need to change the bandages now that he was well enough to tolerate it, although he didn’t know if he was in any predicament to be making demands.

John finishes up, steps over the abandoned log and settles back into the bed again. He waits for the Ghost to return, which isn’t much longer after he’s sat, and as he receives a narrow look for his privacy, he raises his head defiantly.

“Thank ye,” He starts, unapologetic even as he fiddles with the heavy fur across his lap. “If you don't mind, I would still like my clothes. And I should probably change out the bandages, if ye have more cloth.”

Ghost makes a motion with his hand that John doesn't know how to decipher, and at his blank look Ghost rolls his eyes again. He looks away for a moment, like he's trying to decide on something, before he finally seems to give in to whatever internal battle he had been fighting.

“They were...unsalvageable.”

The words come out stilted, as though he hadn't spoken in a long time. His accent is thick, his voice gritty and deep, but John can't help but think it fits him.

Despite his internal cheer that he had finally managed to make the giant talk, John is soft with his reply.

“Aye,” he nods after a moment, not wanting to make a big deal of the new dynamic that had shifted between them, potentially scaring him off. He fiddles with the fur again for a moment, stroking the fine hairs delicately before asking again. “N' the bandages?”

Ghost is silent again for a moment, not meeting John's eyes before there's a slight dip in his head, turning back towards a set of crudely carved drawers and rifling through them before producing a linen sheet. He sets back on the floor, wiping the knife from earlier across his pant leg on either side before setting to work cutting the cloth into long strips. They sit in silence as he works, John holding his tongue that he could do it himself, before he finishes slicing through the old cloth. His eyes glance up at where John sits, lingering on his dirtied bandages.

John takes that as his queue to remove them, wincing as he struggles to unwind them from where they're fastened. It takes him longer than it should, pausing as the last of them stick uncomfortably to the scabs that adorn him. It's his first look at the damage as he pulls the last of it away, and the sight is about as gruesome as he expected it to be.

The wounds are deep and long, scabs dark and lined with angry, inflamed red skin and dried blood. Thankfully infection hadn't seemed to set in, or at least he didn't think it had, it was hard to tell by how thick the dried blood was. He needs to wash the remaining filth off, and he looks to Ghost in silent question, one he seems to understand.

He tosses a strip to him, tilting his chin towards the waterskin at his bedside. John takes the hint and makes work of pouring the water slowly, allowing the cloth to soak in most of the water without dribbling too much onto the fur below. With the cloth properly damp, he makes work of cleaning the best he can, grinding his teeth when the cloth catches and snags gingerly on the wound.

When he's finished, he tosses the newly bloodied scraps with the old ones, looking back at Ghost expectantly for the new bandages.

Ghost doesn't hand them over, instead crawling over til he's in John's space. He's confused by his intentions, if he's being honest. John had thought he had demonstrated well enough that he could manage the task on his own, but as Ghost settles down in front of him, John doesn't know what to make of the expression in his eyes.

They glance up from his chest briefly, as if to ask him a question that John only barely understands. He raises his arms slightly, hesitantly, and Ghost nods before he begins to wrap the strips around his torso.

He's surprisingly gentle about it, although he wraps them a bit snugger than what John could have managed. His head hangs low, obscuring his eyes as he works. John notes how deft his hands are, never grazing even the slightest bit of skin, keeping a distance even at the intimacy of the task. It wouldn't be the first time John had noticed that he didn't like to touch or be touched, but it did bring a sense of resolve that that would be a boundary that he had set.

John keeps his arms hanging awkwardly until the last of the strips are applied, the final edge being tucked soundly into one of the other bandages. As Ghost pulls away from him, it's with a disguised sort of haste that John wasn't sure he would have noticed if he wasn't expecting it.

Before he can say anything, he watches as Ghost rifles through the drawers again. It takes him a moment to find what exactly he was looking for, but as it passes he produces a shirt, old and sewn in patches where it had fallen apart. He holds the cloth for an intimate amount of time, another decision, before he turns and tosses it his way. John snags it from the air, wincing as it tweaks his injury uncomfortably, but he puts it on all the same, reveling in his newfound sense of decency. It strangely fits, despite their difference in size, but he figures perhaps Ghost had just outgrown it.

"Thank you," He says for what feels like the hundredth time, hoping

his appreciation is enough for such an obviously uncomfortable act for the man. Ghost doesn't go about giving him any sort of response again, just settles down against the rug and picks up the knife to go back to his whittling.

Knowing now that he can talk, John feels an insatiable want to hear him speak again. He knows that it probably isn't something the other wants nor will really indulge in, but John has never been much of a quitter in his lifetime.

"What're ye makin'?" He questions into the awkward air, trying to find some semblance of balance between their apparent different wants. He figures either Ghost will answer, or he won't, and John will just have to live with whatever the man decides.

And Ghost doesn't answer, not for a long while as his movements come slower now, more careful. They sit in their tiny silence for about as long as he can stand, before Ghost finally gives him one of his stilted replies.

"A spoon," He rumbles, shucking a chip into the fire that gobbles up the shaving hungrily.

When John doesn't reply right away, not knowing quite what to say, he clarifies.

"There's only one."

John recalls the last meal they had shared, and is reminded vividly that he had seemingly been gifted the utensil. He nods, taking in yet another act of kindness that was such a stark contrast to the way the man presented himself. John didn't know what to make of the contradiction or the revelation besides a quiet, "Ah."

They fall back into their quiet companionship and John falters to find another topic to broach. He supposes he's bothered the man enough, clearly uncomfortable with their transitional dance if the way his shoulders lay hunched and tense is anything to go by, but John is too awake to fall back asleep now.

He knows he'll probably be gone in the morning. Ghost had done enough for him after all, and he didn't even know how to go about setting their dues even. The man clearly enjoyed his solitude, had to know of the village if they were situated so close together, but John reckons he would remember such a strange person as Ghost if he had ever decided to visit. He doesn't know how he had accumulated all his

various items, but that would just have to be one of his many mysteries.

He considers asking Ghost if there was anything he needed, anything at all that John had the means of gifting him for his kindness. As he studies the room again, he can tell the various odds and ends are homemade, staggered between other crafts that John wasn't sure he had the tools out here for. He wants to ask, but he tempers down his curiosity if only for the sake of not angering his host.

As he runs his fingers along the fur blanket again, he's reminded about Mrs. Price, and how long ago she had given him a quilt after his first year helping her husband tend the farm. It had been an act of thanks, in a time where money had been tight for the village and there was little they could pay him for his work. He hadn't accepted the pitiful amount of coin, but she hadn't let him refute the blanket. He thinks about where it lays across his bed at home, and wonders if he could convince her to make another. It would take time, and there was no telling if Ghost would accept it, but it was one of the few proper things he could then hold in his possession if he did.

As though he can hear John's thoughts churning about him, the whittling stops as Ghost glances over at him again. Perhaps he had expected him to go back to sleep after they had changed over his bandages, or perhaps he was just surprised John could stay quiet for so long without being comatose. Either way John shrugs his shoulders lightly, drumming his fingers against his knee.

"Just thinkin' is all. Wanted to know if ye needed anything," it's a bare bones response, and it's one that leaves Ghost staring at him again as if John had just spout absolute nonsense. John fumbles under the gaze, wondering if maybe he had.

"Ya know, as thanks."

"No," Comes an automatic answer, and John is surprised at how readily available the reply had been. It throws him through a new loop, the way the word is nearly spat as if the thought was insulting. John can't read Ghost nearly well enough to understand why reciprocating the generosity would cause the reaction it had, but he knows well enough to lift his hands in gentle surrender, allowing the man his refusal.

It didn't mean John wouldn't find a way. Ghost hadn't known him long enough to be able to gauge the stubborn streak that John had

carted with him all his life. Stubborn to a fault, as his mother would say. As bull-headed as his father had been. Ghost could fight him tooth and nail, but John knew he'd repay his dues in time all the same, whether Ghost liked it or not.

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John was beginning to wonder if the man ever slept. He himself had gotten enough rest it would seem, because as morning began with deep red skies dotted with wispy gray clouds, he still couldn't seem to find the fatigue to sleep, and Ghost had made no attempt after finishing carving the simple spoon. He was still at work, sanding it now, and John didn't know how he wasn't right fuckin' exhausted.

Not that John hadn't been taking up his bed from the moment he had arrived. If he were being honest he felt a little bad about it. Appreciated it all the same, grateful for the rest and care his body had desperately needed, but if the man didn't get rest soon John wouldn't know how to begin taking care of *him*.

He shuffles the blankets to the side and sits with his legs folded on the edge of bed. With the sun rising, it would be about time for him to move on anyway. He gets up slowly, careful of the way his injuries shift under the bandages, but the scabs weren't as stiff as they had been the day prior, so he counts the win even as the pain coaxes the wind out of his lungs. He allows himself a greedy breath of air, steadying his hand along the wall before righting himself. Ghost is looking at him again in question, his hands poised mid task like he was waiting for direction.

John looks to the window, a little brighter now, and then back at Ghost. He smiles in a way that he hopes is convincing.

"I should be setting out, if I want to get back to the village by sundown. I -"

"No," Ghost says simply. He sets the spoon down lightly before standing himself. Imposing in a way that he shouldn't be, only having about two inches or so on John. He looks down at him, eyes narrowed again in that way of his that John doesn't know how to decipher, but still John holds his ground. It would be unreasonable for him to stay any longer, they both had to know that. Not only that but John couldn't be sure the man had gotten a decent night's sleep since he'd carried him here.

"I'm right enough now that I can make it back," John argues, folding

his arms across his chest. A shield between them, despite Ghost having not moved from the rug.

“You can barely stand,” Ghost scoffs, turning away from him then to take his own glance out the window, assessing, judging by the way his eyes linger.

“I’m fine,” He bites back, cross at the way that sure, Ghost was right. It’d been a bitch to get even this far. But he was made of sterner stuff, as Price would say. The cold would numb him through until he couldn’t feel anything and then he’d be right as rain.

It was a shoddy plan, fine, but he knew he could do it.

“Lay back down,” Ghost orders, feeding him that goddamn *look* again, and John feels just about as bull-headed as everyone says he is. He frowns and raises up his chin, a little bit cocky considering the man could easily take him down a peg if he really wanted, but he would stand his ground on this.

“Ya can walk me if you must but ’m going -”

“There’s another storm,” he drawls out, annoyed. After a moment's consideration, he continues, “And I’m not dragging you anywhere. Lay down.”

John feels his nose flare with the breath he huffs out, being ordered about like a damned dog. He notes, somewhere briefly despite his anger, that that was the longest sentence Ghost had ever spoken to him, but his ire is an all consuming thing.

He points to the window, nearly clear skies peaking above the frost of the glass and he knows they both know it.

“The storm’s past. It’s -”

Ghost grumbles somewhere low in his throat, eyes ablaze with barely contained emotion as he stalks across the room. He leans in close enough that for the first time, John can tell that his eyes are a deep brown. Close enough that his breath would caress his face if the mask weren’t always fixed in place. It startles John into a quiet thing, muting the buzz of anger long enough that shock could settle in its place. Ghost doesn’t touch him, but it’s only by inches.

“There’s. Another. Storm.” He enunciates slowly, voice deep and gritty and truly such a raw thing. John wonders if it pains him, having to

Speak so much to him when he clearly doesn't share company all that often. Enough so anyway that his first reaction to John at all was not to speak, but to instead ignore him.

"I dinnae understand," He argues still, softer now that his anger had been whisked away to somewhere else. Ghost lifts his head, eyes heavenward as if praying for a moment, before his hand whips out to grab the scruff of his neck, fingers curling deep into the shirt as he stalks them both over to the window. Despite the aggression of his actions, he's still mindful it would seem as John stumbles and winces, placing a hand to his abdomen as if it would keep his wound from spreading. He takes them slowly, and John doesn't fight him, his only choice being to follow.

He lets go of John as they get to the window, pointedly turning his head in the direction he wants John to look. John tilts his own along the glass, looking out to the right and finding nothing but twisting tree branches and -

Dark gray clouds, heavy and practically black in the early morning. A storm front.

John closes his eyes and rests his forehead against the frigid glass. Ghost seems to get the hint that no, he wasn't going to argue anymore about returning back to the village, and disappears from his side, seemingly sated.

John stands there until the chill nearly freezes his skin to the window, before mumbling out a quiet, "M' sorry."

He stays in place, not sure Ghost had heard him, before an equally quiet voice calls back to him.

"Get some rest," Is all he says, and John shifts to look at him, surprised that that of all things would be his response. He had expected, if he was being truthful, anything other than the soft reply. It was as though he had never even been angry in the first place.

Ghost's back is curved away from him where he's sat in front of the fire again, the sound of sanding filling the room as he goes back to work. John stays at the window, reminded of his earlier assessment of Ghost's pitiful sleeping habits, and makes a decision.

"Why don't ye," At the sound of the sanding halting abruptly, John clarifies. "Get some rest, that is."

When Ghost doesn't move, doesn't reply, John continues. "Well I've been taking up the bed, haven't seen you rest since I got here."

When he still isn't graced with a response, John considers that maybe he had come to a different conclusion to his offer, and sighs. "I won't go anywhere, 'm just not tired is all."

Ghost sits up a little bit straighter, mulling over the words, maybe. John can't be sure of much of anything considering the man. He had been an enigma since he'd gotten here, and John wasn't much sure if he would ever begin to make sense.

Finally Ghost twists from where he's sitting, fixing him with one of his long stares, before gesturing slowly back towards the bed.

"Get some rest," He says again, and that's the last thing he seems to have for him before he turns his back on John again.

John sighs but does as he says, walking back over to the bed and shuffling the furs back before crawling in. In the quiet of the room, nothing but the cackling of fire and the soft scrape of bulrush against wood, John thinks he can hear the distant howl of wind through the trees.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! If you've made it this far, thank you so much for reading :)
Ghost/Soap as rotted my brain.

This fic is a WIP so bare with me lol.

I'm only part of the way through the campaign, so fuck it babe
they freeform. I'm taking them and running.

Also I have very little knowledge of Scottish slang, so if you lovelies see something and go 'oop' - please feel free to correct me. Google can only provide me so much.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

John eventually falls to rest. It's a listless, temperamental sleep, one that fringes on the border of nightmares every time he slips in too deep. They're nonsensical at best, but they jostle him awake all the same.

After his third attempt at rest, and subsequently his third time awakening, John rubs at his eyes in annoyance before tracking his gaze around the room. The wind had picked up severely, and John could feel its wrath through the slots in the wood of the cabin, shivering and burrowing deeper into the covers in an effort to shield himself from the cold.

His eyes find Ghost not a moment after he's settled, boots pointed in his direction as he curls in towards the fire. Soft snores warring against the crackle of flame. The fire had dimmed at some point, burning through its host and from the chill of the cabin, John knew it wasn't enough to keep either of them warm for very long. From where he lay, he could only imagine how Ghost could still sleep, even while lying nearly a foot away from the fire.

How he had fallen asleep in the first place without one of the many furs he had lingering about the place John didn't know, but it felt selfish to hog them now that the man was finally at rest. He sighs quietly, struggling to sit back up before he's heaving the blankets away, trying to stand as silently as he can so as to not disturb him. He pries one of the furs from the pile before regarding the man's sleeping form. There was no telling how heavy of a sleeper he was, but it was better than letting him freeze.

As gingerly as he can, despite his wound and how heavy the pelt is, he lays the thick fur across Ghost. He's nearly finished when a hand juts out to grab his wrist in a tight hold, startling him as it pulls him until he's bent - wild, sleep hazed eyes gazing up at him. John lets the last of the fur fall away, gasping from the pain of his wound. He waits for the recognition to sink in as his wrist is let go of, as though the hand that had grabbed him were burned.

"It's cold, I was going to add to the fire," He says calmly, despite the

sudden thunder of his heart and the twist of his stomach. He stumbles around Ghost's silent form, wincing as he hefts a large wooden log, dropping it more than placing it in the fire and sending embers to scatter. He walks back to the bed as though nothing had happened, gathering under the covers again as he waits for the chill to seep out of the room and the throb to leave his skin.

When he chances a glance, Ghost is staring down at the fur as if he'd never seen it before. A sort of blank, hollowed out gaze as if he was somewhere else. John couldn't pretend that he understood, doesn't pretend he ever will, but the new found warmth is causing his eyes to droop with fatigue. He rustles around until he's comfortable, and when the man still has yet to move, he lets out a sigh.

"It's okay. Go back to sleep, Ghost," He yawns as he lets his eyes close, too tired and sore to notice his slip.

He thinks he hears the door open and close, but by then he has already succumbed to the wisps of rest.

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He's gone again. It's the first thing John knows before he's even fully pried his sleep crusted eyes open.

Through his blurry vision he spots the blanket he had given Ghost dumped unceremoniously on the rug, long forgotten. He doesn't know what he had expected, but it was somehow more than this. The rage outside had yet to temper down, and from the indigo hued clouds, dark and heavy, John could tell he had slept the day away. He would have to adjust his schedule back to normal at the rate he was going, or else he would be bloody useless come spring.

He runs a hand across his face, noting the length of his stubble. He would need a shave soon too, if they had the means of managing it.

'They' was a funny word, and he scoffs at it in the silence of the cabin. It was hard to consider them much of anything, when his counterpart was more phantom than man. Wishing he had managed to stay was another funny inclusion to the warped sense of companionship he shared with Ghost. He had made him stay, but he kept no regards for himself. It was a touch infuriating, but even so he quiets it down into a simmer. He was in no position to tell the man what to do with his time, even if that time was spent out in the wilds freezing to death.

What he can't quiet is the worry, because despite his comings and

goings, John would like to consider them at least partially acquainted. Friends seemed a touch too formal, despite all Ghost had done for him. Not that John wouldn't like to be, but he had a feeling Ghost didn't keep many of those around.

He waits for Ghost's return as the gale outside hammers and wails. At some point he rises to fold the blanket on the floor, placing it safely out of the way but still leaving it as an option should Ghost return cold and in need of it. He sits on the rug and waits for him then - practically bored out of his damn mind with nothing to do besides it, tending absentmindedly to the fire whenever it dims too low.

He doesn't know the passage of time, but it is a long while before the door is kicked open, carried on a harrowing wind that sends it to the wall. John jumps, expecting the wind to have taken the damn door down, but heavy foot falls tell him his companion had returned. He scoots himself to the edge of the rug, half turning to get a glimpse of the spectacle Ghost had made of himself.

He's head to toe covered in snow, clumps clinging to anything it could reach. Ghost pushed his hood back with his free hand, a hare dripping blood in his other. He stomps in like John isn't even there, kicking his boots free and sending them to scatter by the fire. He tosses the hare down on a table before padding over to the dresser, stopping to hoist his cloak over the rafters where it could drip and dry in peace.

"Turn away," Ghost orders, his back to John as he rifles through the drawers. He doesn't check to see if he obeys, but John affords him the privacy he had given him so early in his arrival, turning his body around to stare at the opposing wall. He hears the shuffling of clothes, the wet splotch as they hit the floor.

Serve's ye right, is all John could think, for going out there when he told John he shouldn't.

When the last of the ruffling stops and John can be sure he's finished with changing, he slowly adjusts back around. Ghost is at the table shoved in the corner now, arms bare in a loose fitted tunic as he makes use of the rabbit, skinning and carving away the more useful meats as he goes. John watches the work quietly, taking in the muscle of his arms and the scars that wrap around them. It felt private to witness, and not for the first time did John feel like he was intruding on something he shouldn't, but it was the first time he could put meaning to the feeling in the gut of his belly.

As the meal is properly slaughtered and quartered, John doesn't miss the tense lines of Ghost's shoulders, a weight that had burrowed deep in the lines of his back. John is trying and failing to figure out how to go about what was wrong, but to his surprise, it's Ghost that breaks their treaty first.

"What did you mean by it?"

John can feel his face open in confusion, the way his lips part and his eyes widen in slight. He flounders for an answer, but comes up blank instead.

"Meant what?" He asks as he tumbles over their previous, stilted conversations, searching blindly for anything at all.

"Ghost."

Ah, he thinks. He can remember now, barely. The use of the moniker slipping from his tongue as he gave in to the confines of sleep.

"Didn't have anything else to call you. Ye never gave me your name." He answers truthfully with a shrug. Despite Ghost's offense, there really wasn't anything else that fit him. Perhaps John could have been a little bit more secretive about the nickname, but it was bound to fall out with how wide his damned mouth was. It had only been a matter of time.

Whether Ghost accepts the name or doesn't, he makes no show of either. He had asked, and he had received his answer, and to a man like him John supposes that was enough.

To a man like John, it wasn't.

"Why?" He questions out loud, before amending. "Why won't you tell me?"

Ghost separates another hunk of meat from the bone. "You won't be here long enough for it to matter."

He scoops the meat into the pot that had somehow crossed the room when John most likely had been at rest, throwing in a handful of other bits that he couldn't see beyond his hulking form. John continues to watch as he brings the pot to the fire, hooking it to the rod before he sits down to tend to it.

John supposes he's right, although he can't place the sting the words

leave beneath his skin. A type of rejection, maybe. Although he hadn't meant to stay this long, John was stuck until further notice. Why he didn't give his name, or why he had never asked for John's unfurls something in his chest that makes him want to grind in his heels. John owed the man his life - he wouldn't accept just passing through like the storm overhead. He couldn't leave as though he had never been here at all.

As much as Ghost wanted that to be the case, John wanted something different. He wanted to make him talk, make him give something other than the little pieces John had to figure out himself. He *wanted* to call the man a friend, and John was beginning to understand that he didn't need his permission to do so.

"M' name's John," he tells him. Maybe it's to dig a little deeper into the man's resolve. Maybe it's just to get the name out of his chest, to be something. John doesn't know anything other than that it feels right.

"I didn't ask," Ghost grumbles, eyes dark as they flick heavensward for a moment. *Good*, John thinks. He should be annoyed - they were equals in that respect then.

"I know, but I figured if ye won't let me leave, ya might as well get to know me." John quips defiantly, grinning as he leans forward as much as his wound will allow him. The fire is rigorous enough that he can feel the heat bleed across his cheeks, likely painting them flush.

Ghost doesn't grace him with one of his responses right away, stoking the fire as a stray log crackles and breaks.

"And why would I do that?"

John ponders the question, genuinely enough anyway. When nothing comes to mind at first a gust of wind rattles the windows and John finds his answer with another smile. "Dunno," he shrugs, waving a hand towards the door. "When do ye think the storm will end?"

Ghost leans back on his hands to take a good look outside, contemplating as the glass shakes as fat snowflakes pepper and ping against it. John can't see his face with the mask in place, but he can tell his mind is running a mile a minute - deciding.

"It'll get worse before it gets better," He rumbles out slowly, honesty touching every one of his words.

“Then we’ve got time,” John claps his hands against his thighs. It’s not what Ghost wanted to hear, judging by the way his eyes slit at John on their way back to the fire, but he couldn’t care less. Unless Ghost was preparing to toss his ass out into the snow, something he had definitely demonstrated himself to be against, John was right cozy, and he was going to make use of the time they had together.

John begins his self imposed mission by ranting about anything he can get his mind around. The village, mostly, what with it being the center of his world. He talks about why he had been out here in the first place, about how the village was low on food after the rough harvest this year.

“Price and Gaz, Rudy and Alejandro and I, we tried our best. But I’m sure ye had your fair share of the drought this year, yeah?”

He prattles on about the winter, how the village had agreed to send some of them out to hunt. They had split to cover more ground, and now he was here.

Ghost doesn’t interrupt him, doesn’t grunt or acknowledge any of the nonsense coming out of John’s mouth. He tends the pot and keeps his eyes straight forward, never once giving the inclination that he was even listening at all. There are no questions, not a word the whole time, but John doesn’t mind. Until Ghost were to tell him to shut up, he had no plan of stopping any time soon.

When the pot is done, Ghost stands to get the bowls. He’s gracious enough to hand a bowl out to John after it’s ladled, but John shakes his head and scoots over to fish out his own, grabbing the other empty bowl on the floor and purposefully invading Ghost’s space. He doesn’t miss how Ghost moves away from him almost instantaneously, and John isn’t a prick enough to feel righteous in his decision. Ghost turns away until his back is to John, and so John settles with his back turned to him.

He can hear the rustle of fabric this time, being so close. Can hear how the skull is gently placed on the floor. John wonders how he can keep the damn thing on without sweating his arse off.

“Why don’t you just take it off?” He decides to ask.

“N’ show my face?” Comes the immediate response, almost too quickly.

“Aye,” John agrees, sipping a hunk of mushroom off his spoon as he

turns to glance over his shoulder, taking in Ghost's hunched over form.

"No."

John tilts away with a twist of his lips and a roll of his eyes.

"Why, you ugly?" He quips in his annoyance. It's meant to be a joke, but Ghost remains steadfast with not answering. John winces, realization punctual as the other man seems to take his comment seriously. When no reply comes, and not even the sound of eating fills in the gaps of their silence, John can only regret.

"I doubt that," He amends quietly, thinking of the dark, strangely pretty eyes that settle in the shadows where he keeps them.

Ghost doesn't reply.

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They're slow to finish, but John had lost his appetite in the midst of his screw up. So when a hand juts out from behind him, he hands the bowl over without fight. He watches as the boots are grabbed next. Hears the rustle of them being slipped on before the door is opened and shut again, a caress of wind clinging to his spine like a kiss before it's gone again. John lifts himself from in front of the fire, padding over to the bed before settling himself in again. When Ghost comes back, the bowls are clean, and it forces John to recognize that even after he insulted the man, he was still cleaning up after him.

"Thank you," He says quietly, not quite timid but not quite as sure of himself as he had been before. When his only answer is the clatter of the bowls placed on the table, John feels a sense of weary settle in his bones.

Ghost sits on the floor before leaning back against the rug, staring up at the ceiling with one leg bent and an arm slung over his belly. He didn't look much tired, more like he was waiting for fatigue to creep up on him instead.

John knew the feeling.

He does then what he's best at and picks up around the part he had left off, chatting aimlessly about the odds and ends of the village. Anything to fill the blasted silence that courts them so relentlessly. He's halfway through a story of Alejandro and Rudy when Ghost

finally seems to snap.

“Do you ever shut up?” He growls, cutting John off when he was almost to the good part.

“Not really, ye can ask about anyone who knows me,” He grins sheepishly, lifting his head to run a hand across the back of his neck. He had expected Ghost to maybe grow tired of him, it had maybe even been his aim in the beginning, but now that he was here he could admit that he felt a little bad.

“And they don’t gut you for it?” Ghost comments, sounding so nearly in disbelief that it makes John smile. Just a touch, but a smile all the same.

“The lion’d be the first,” he jokes, but it seems to fall flat as Ghost doesn’t laugh. He simply huffs a breath of annoyance before he turns on his side, away from John’s prying eyes, and John allows him his peace.

He mourns in their new quiet, wishing conversation would flow more naturally between them, but knows that it probably never would. John’s plan had failed him.

When a soft snore captures his attention, the only sign at all that Ghost had drifted off, he allows his eyes to dance across his sleeping form again. The boots that still had to be soaked through, the pants that were poorly sewn in places, the tunic that was equally in bad condition. The cabin wasn’t so hot for them to nearly be enough, and John notices how the fur he had left folded for him had been left cast aside. John can do nothing but let it go, letting it be just another nonsensical part of him.

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He’s awake for a long time, taking in the soft sounds of the other man and the singing of the wind. He waits for sleep to claim him, but finds that the somnus must have missed him when he had passed over, leaving him far too antsy in his stead. He tosses and turns, gently, lest he want to rip open his scabs or awaken his counterpart.

As he lays there for what feels like an infinite amount of time, he can swear that the swell outside nearly doubles with its intensity, a battering ram against the small structure as though it’s sole purpose was to bring the place down. Despite its trying, only the windows seem to shake in their panes, and yet it created such a racket John

wondered how Ghost hadn't woken up by now. Perhaps he was used to it. There was no telling how long he had been out here. With that, John could only assume that he had always lived alone, judging from the state of the cabin and his actions.

His wounds were itchy under the cloth, burning and sore, and he has to stop himself from digging in his nails and ripping them back open. He tries to distract himself, his mind running somewhere a thousand miles away and yet somehow still confined to the four walls of their cabin.

John himself had always been extroverted, always scoping out the next person to chat their ear off. He was quick to make friends around the village once he'd arrived a handful of years ago, and had left plenty behind in his last. Solitude wasn't something John much understood, being someone who sought out company any time he could. It was as strange a concept as Ghost was.

John was sure there were people out there that didn't like him, it was only natural, but before he arrived here he might have told you he could charm anyone - at least after a time. He had been here days now, and Ghost always seemingly had this wall built around him. John only knew

a handful of things about the man, and most of them had been by observation. Ghost didn't talk about himself, barely spoke unless he was spoken to, and even then half the time he didn't reply. He didn't like to touch or be touched unless it was on his terms. His accent was unfamiliar, although plenty of villages housed their own dialects. He was, despite his rugged appearance and unapproachable demeanor, endlessly kind and even gentle.

John sighs, letting the breath carry into the room.

"You won't be here long enough for it to matter," Ghost had said, and John was sure he had meant every word of it, but something about hiding something so simple as a name seemed silly to him. It was just a name, same as the rest of them had. Same as his face - it just didn't make sense to John to hide something everyone had. He wondered, as briefly as he could let himself, about Ghost's face. What it had to look like under that mask of his. His eyes were the only center to his mirage of visions, the only part of him that Ghost would let him see. He had joked earlier about maybe Ghost being too ugly to show his face, but despite that, he could never seem to find an image where the man truly was, always aided by blonde lashes framing dark irises.

He was lost in his thoughts about Ghost when a sudden movement sounds over his shoulder. John rolls over to catch the man sitting ramrod straight, chest heaving but breath somehow silent, most likely caught by the cloth. There was a tremor to his hands as they find his mask, a sense of lost tension leaving him when he finds it still in place.

His eyes flick to him as John sits up to mirror him, concerned but not quite sure how to voice it lest he send Ghost away. His eyes have that hazy look to them again, as if he couldn't be sure where he was.

"Hey, it's alright, yeah?" He says slowly, much like he would to a wild, desperate animal. It seems to startle Ghost all the same, if the twitch of his hands were anything to go by. John can see the way the tendons of his throat stand out on his neck, the stiffness of his shoulders, the bob of his adams apple. Ghost was afraid, and John wondered what could cause fear in a man like him.

Ghost stands as abruptly as he had sat up, pushing himself into standing with such blinding intensity it left John wondering how he could move so quickly. Before John can blink, he's grabbing his cloak from rafters, heading for the door like he always does. John feels weary as worry takes over him. The storm had indeed gotten worse, and John doesn't know how anyone could make it out there before it would get better again, as Ghost had promised.

"Ghost," He calls, voice small as he tries to soothe the man.

Ghost stops with his hand on the handle, gripping it so tight his knuckles are white as he tilts his head in John's direction. John doesn't know how to get through to him, but he knows that he wants to try.

"Ye were right, the storm's gettin' worse. I wouldn't go out there."

But before John can even finish the sentence, Ghost is already pushing over the threshold, not even bothering to close the door behind him.

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By the time John had managed to closed the door, there was already a wet slurry sticking to the floorboards. It chilled his feet as he slid through it, the force of the wind giving him a bit of work before he was able to stick it closed again. He had to rustle through the drawers to find something suitable to mop up the mess with, and by then he didn't quite care if he got all of it or not. Would serve him right to

have fucked up floors.

John couldn't manage to stay mad for long, however. After about an hour had passed his worry had tripled into something unbearable. It was a near fury outside, and even wearing all he did John didn't know how Ghost could survive it. The temperature outside was a brutal thing, one that had left a bone-deep chill in John after only a minute of exposure. How Ghost would manage, he didn't know. Where he even went out here in the wilds left John floundering. Leaving to walk it off was one thing, but leaving for such a prolonged time was another.

He ponders in wonder if he should go find him before Ghost ends up killing himself. He spots his boots in the corner by the dresser, and that only solidifies his resolve as he walks over to put them on. Despite how he ignores John and gives him attitude, John would admit he had a sort of fondness for him. Or at least the mystery of him, if nothing else. He didn't quite know what he would do if his Ghost didn't come back to haunt the cabin with him, and wasn't that the strangest thought yet?

He rifles through the drawers for something warmer, and finds another black cloak hidden in the depths. He wraps and fastens the cloak across his shoulders, noticing how the cloth seemingly dwarfs him with the way it drags along the floor, and tells himself that it would be enough. It wouldn't, in nothing but a shirt and long johns underneath, but it would have to do.

He quickly crossed the room to toss another log onto the fire for good measure. They would both need to thaw once they got back, and he had no telling of how long that would be. With the log securely in place, he paces his way to the door, but not before it could swing open.

Ghost's dark silhouette pierces the doorway. He doesn't move in from the cold right away, probably as surprised by John as John is of him, but after a moment he slinks in slowly, more firewood under his arms as he kicks the door shut behind him, like the wind wasn't even there at all.

His head is lowered, narrow eyes peering down at him almost accusing. He doesn't say anything, just stares John down like he was demanding answers.

"Bit nasty out there, isn't it?" He says, not answering Ghost like he

wants him to, because the man had had him worried sick for over an hour and comes back with a bundle of wood and no answers himself. He's caked in snow for one thing, and there's a shiver in his bones, although he tries to hide it.

Ghost scoffs. "A bit."

His eyes rake over John one last time before they dart off to the side, like he's unsure. "Wouldn't be thinking of goin' out there yourself, would you?"

"Only to find ye. Thankfully you've saved me from havin' to do that," John says as he shrugs the cloak back off his shoulders, folding it neatly as he gets out of the man's way. He sets his boots back where he found them.

"And why would you do that?" Ghost retorts dryly, stepping in to drop the wood on the pile next to the fireplace before slipping off his own cloak, setting it to the rafters again.

"Ah dinnae ken. Perhaps because ye gon' kill yourself one of these days," He quips back over his shoulder, placing the cloth back in the drawer.

"I'd say that's more your thing, isn't it?" Ghost hums as he sits down to take off his boots, and John stops in closing the drawer to turn and look at him, almost in disbelief.

"Did ye jus' make a joke?" He asks, thundered by the mere thought of it. "N' a joke about me nearly dying nonetheless. I didn't think you could do that," he barks out a laugh suddenly, elated to be learning something new.

"You don't know anything about me," Ghost grumbles back, shoulders tensing just a smidge up to his ears. *God bless him*, John thinks, giddy. *He's embarrassed.*

"Well pardon me, whose fault is that?" He snarks, leaning up against the dresser to close the drawer with his hip, his arms crossed. Ghost tosses his boots back into their place to dry, but doesn't give him a reply again. How typical of him.

Ghost pulls his knife from the holster he keeps it, pulling another block of wood to him and beginning to strip it of its bark. John rolls his eyes at his lack of response but moves to settle a safe distance away from him on the rug, watching his movements, considering.

He'd wondered before about the craft, and now was no exception. With nothing else to do between them, the night still dark and yet somehow young, he makes a decision.

"Could ye teach me to do that?" He nods towards the craft, and Ghost slows his motions as he mulls over the request.

"I suppose," He drawls out. "I'm not much of a teacher."

John shrugs, scooting closer. "M' sure it'll be fine."

It's a moment before Ghost hands over the wood, and then the knife, handle first. John takes them gingerly before attempting to mirror his previous position, eyes flicking up for Ghost's assessment. "Like this?"

Ghost shakes his head slightly before reaching to gently adjust John's fingers until his index is lined across the top of the handle and his thumb along the bottom.

"It will help with keeping control of the blade," He murmurs, his hand not moving from where they lay across John's. It feels strangely intimate, in the light of the fire, with Ghost touching him so willingly. John swallows, peeking through his lashes as he waits for direction, eyes flicking between Ghost and where their hands intertwine.

"Start by keeping it shallow," Ghost rumbles, guiding John's hand so that the blade slips under the bark, gliding down the wood as the brittle husk breaks off in clumps, falling to the floor. Ghost removes his hands to gather the chips before tossing them in the fire, clearing his throat.

"Right, there you go." He nods with a slight dip of his head, settling his hands on his thighs like he didn't quite know what to do with them.

"So I just keep doing that?" John asks quietly, looking away to focus on the task at hand. He follows the same motion that Ghost had shown him, trying to keep his hands just as steady and sure. The barks gives easily enough under his ministrations, but he keeps it slow lest he butcher himself. He feels nervous under Ghost's careful watch, and he feels himself swallow again, his mouth full of cotton.

"Yes," Ghost answers, his voice just as low.

They sit close together as John strips away the last of the bark, nothing to say between them as Ghost gathers the fallen bits as they

go. John's head feels almost as full of cotton as his mouth does, but with no bark left to strip he turns back to Ghost for direction.

"What are we making?" He asks, looking up to find Ghost's eyes had never left him. They look away now, and Ghost clears his throat again to answer.

"Didn't have anything in mind, make what you want," He answers, tossing another stray piece of bark into the fire. They both watch it burn away into nothing, before an idea comes to John.

He sets out to roughly shape his creation, carving out the wood as neither of them talk. It's wretchedly peaceful compared to their earlier evening. He assists John briefly to show him how to create the finer details, tilting the blade at a shallow angle so that the tip digs in softly to the wood, but for the most part he lets John do as he pleases. He thinks he can understand why Ghost had found a talent in whittling, although from the rough shape of his craft John doesn't think he'll find his any time soon. Still, it is calming, and John feels his eyes droop as it washes over him.

Occasionally, Ghost will correct him when his grip slips into something looser, but other than that all that fills the cabin is the howl of the wind, the quiver of the windows, the soft shave of wood, and the cackle of the fire.

"You're a good teacher," John murmurs after Ghost corrects him silently again, stilling his hand to look up at him.

Ghost meets his gaze for only a moment, before his eyes flick away to glance into the fire. "You're doing good, for the first time. You take direction well."

John smiles something private, glancing down at his meager creation and knows Ghost is lying. Or maybe he isn't. John doesn't know enough about whittling to tell between the two, but he does know that it looks absolutely horrid. He's still smiling when he sets his small unfinished sculpture aside, holding out the knife in the same way that Ghost had held it out to him.

"Think I'm ready for bed. It should be morning soon enough," He yawns. Ghost takes the knife slowly from his hand with another nod.

John scoots back until his hands feel the furs of the bed, parting the blankets and crawling under them before he rolls onto his side, watching as Ghost takes another piece of wood in his hands and

begins stripping it.

“Not going to bed?” He asks, although he already knows the answer.

“No.”

John hums but doesn't argue. He watches Ghost until his eyes feel too heavy to keep open, and when they close, sleep claims him almost instantly.

No nightmares follow him.

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When morning comes, it's with a sticky heat that seems at odds with the days prior. John groans as he pulls the furs back from his body, relishing in the cooler air as it burrows into his skin. Sunlight peaks streams across the floorboards, dust freckled and shimmering in its light. It's a relief to not hear the wind for the first time in ages, and John takes a moment to thank the gods for the new kind of quiet that settles over them.

He isn't much surprised to see Ghost taking advantage of the good weather, although he does wish the man would stop his disappearing act. Whether he knew John wouldn't leave without saying goodbye or not, today would be the perfect time to make his trek back down to the village. The thought of leaving, however, wars inside of him in a way he hadn't expected. As he lays back against the pillow, it comes to him that he doesn't want to leave just yet. Last night had felt like a sort of breakthrough, although he couldn't fathom much as to why. The man had just seemed more open, more willing, as if John were getting through to him somehow.

Leaving now might just damage all of that.

It wasn't like he couldn't come back, he thinks. The man was in desperate need of new clothes, and he would eventually have to return the ones he borrowed should he leave. He lets himself wonder for a moment if he could convince Ghost to come back down before he shoots the idea away so violently it makes his head spin. Ghost was a skittish creature. Even if it wasn't by outright refusal, there was no telling how it would overwhelm the other man.

Not for the first time does John wonder where he came from either, how he ended so high up in the mountains. The village was the closest life that he knew of, and Ghost had to know of it. Why he had never

seen him in the years he had spent there, John didn't know. It's a question he'll have to save for later, although he knows he most likely won't get an answer.

He sits up, wincing as his wound pulls in a new way, tender almost as the day he had gotten it. As he presses his hand under his shirt to the bandages, he finds them hot to the touch, much like the rest of him. They would need to switch them out again soon.

John stands on unsteady feet, swiping the waterskin as he goes. He presses the cool skin to his forehead and sighs into the feeling before taking a swig of it. He drops it back into its place before he makes his slow, stumbling journey to the door, the glass window too frosted over to be much use in taking a look outside. He opens the door, the cool air washing over him as he takes in the earth around him for the first time in days. There isn't much to find, just the trees, a stack of firewood covered by pelts under an awning with a familiar axe up against it. There's another small shack not too far from the house, although John can't tell what the structure is for, wide and tall. A soundly made well is nestled to his far right, brambles and deadened vine clinging to the stone.

The day is strangely clear, despite a few heavy clouds that peter in and out, covering the sun before being whisked away again. There's no sign of Ghost, but John doesn't mind. He can see the set of fresh tracks that lead from the door, carried out around a bend of trees until they disappear from view. If there was one thing about Ghost, it was that he always returned. John would just have to trust him on that.

He closes the door before he could siphon all the heat out of the cabin, although the cold had helped bring him back to a sense of normal, more clear headed. The breath of fresh air after being bedridden in the cabin for so long had done him good. He felt reinvigorated, almost.

With nothing left to do, John decides to study where he had been kept for so long, pacing around the room and observing the various different objects that aligned it. The table was a cluttered mess. Clay pots filled with herbs and wild grains. Bowls and plates, utensils, various smaller pelts amongst other things. He finds his hunting knife strewn amongst them, taking the weight into his hand. He marvels at it, previously having thought it lost. He smiles as he tosses it up into the air before catching it again in his palm. He would have to thank Ghost when he returned, he had always been partial to this particular one.

With his new treasure found, he makes his way over to flop upon the rug, picking up the beginnings of a wooden mountain lion that he had left the night before. It didn't look much like a lion yet, but he was sure with time he could manage it. He sets out to start carving away the underbelly and the legs, chuckling to himself in delight as the shape gives away. Notching and pushing the knife in at steep angles to chip away the harsher lines gives him trouble, his hands unsure and fumbling as the sculpture gets smaller and smaller with each shave of wood. It keeps him busy, however, and keeps his mind from wandering to places it maybe shouldn't.

The sun feels warm on his back, and it isn't long before he's unsticking the fabric away from his shoulders and chest. He's sweating again something fierce, and he considers taking the damn thing off for all the trouble it's causing. His wounds burn the longer he fumbles with his craft, and several times he has to pull the waterskin to him to quench the dryness of his mouth and throat.

He pauses to rest his hand against his forehead, and finds it damp and hot. He tires at the thought of another fever setting in, not knowing what much could have caused it being so cooped up inside.

He would be fine, he was sure. Nothing he hadn't handled before.

The sun had moved past the window by the time Ghost returns, the quiet jingle of the door handle startling John as he knicks the blade across his thumb. He curses, settling the shallow cut against his tongue as he twists to get a look at Ghost, glare almost accusing as dark eyes meet his.

"What did you do?" He sighs, closing the door behind him. A fresh hunk of meat was in his hand and there was a streak of blood across his thigh from where he had wiped it. John unsticks the bleeding thumb from his mouth before answering.

"You surprised me is all," He says, grabbing a handful of shavings and tossing them in the fire with his good hand. He puts the thumb back on his tongue before pushing himself to stand. His head spins for a moment, and he fumbles, nearly tottering back to the ground before a hand juts out to steady him, gripping his arm.

"Aye, thanks," He says, but not before the same hand presses a cool palm to his forehead, delightfully cold. So much that John nearly sighs into it, pressing in further before the fingers could disappear.

"You have a fever," Ghost says bluntly, leaving briefly to place the

slab of meat on the table. “Why are you up?” He presses back into John’s space, shepherding him towards the bed. John pushes away, his feet hitting the line of furs before he’s stumbling, landing on his arse with a huff.

“M’ fine,” He argues. The furs feel itchy against his skin. His clothes feel itchy. His wounds itch. It’s annoying.

Ghost gives him a look, equally annoyed it seemed, before stepping out of John's space to attend to his latest hunt and prepare the next meal. John doesn’t think he could stomach something hot, although hunger pangs deep in his belly.

He flops haphazardly across the bed space, letting the quiet sound of sliced meat settle between them and fill the cabin.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for such a kind reception to the first chapter :) I hope you all enjoy the second!

Thank you for reading, I love you all! Hope 2023 is treating everyone well so far!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Wound Care for the squeamish this chapter.

It's not explicit by any means, but it's a little bit of ick.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dinner is a quiet affair, but John accepts their usual trade of silence as a headache blooms beneath his skull. It leaves him nauseated as it throbs at the base of his neck, and he ends up wasting more of the meal than he feels comfortable with. When Ghost had come to take the bowl away from him, he had paused, eyes lifting to John in question, but he had just shoo'd his concern away with a mumble about not being hungry, and that had seemed to be enough.

Now John was laid on his back, an itch to toss and turn under his skin, but each movement left him holding his breath as the headache would pull him into surrender, waiting for the pain to subside before he could properly breathe again. If Ghost could tell his discomfort, he doesn't say anything from where he's perched by the fire, but John can feel his eyes slot over to him every so often.

Eventually John finds a place comfortable enough that sleep takes him in a fragile hold, one that leaves him waking up as soon as dreams wander around to claim him. He always falls away a moment later, but the sudden jolt of waking up again rattles his head something anew while he tries to find his position again. It's a frustrating game he plays with himself, but he tries nonetheless.

He's restless, groaning at awaking again when something soothing and cool presses to his forehead. Through blurry eyes he watches Ghost's hand retreat, and finds the man sat not far from the edge of the bed, looking down at him with eyes as close to pity as he had ever seen them. He raises his hand to find thin cotton under his fingers, and recognition settles somewhere in the fog of his mind.

"For the fever. It should help," Ghost says, but the words sound faraway in John's ears, like he was speaking through a wall rather than from right beside him. Still, John grunts his appreciation, garbled but he knows Ghost will understand somehow. Sleep begins to beckon to him again, and he loses himself to the water drop that cascades

down his cheek and into the linen of his shirt.

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Waking again, although this time dreamless, his eyes crack open to find that it was still somehow night, if the darkness of the window was anything to go by. The wet cloth had somehow managed to rest in place despite how he was sure he had tossed and turned, although it was now warm. An ache had slowly settled into his bones, courtesy of the fever he was sure, and he groaned in the discomfort of his skin.

His wounds burn under their wrapping, and he grits his teeth from where he presses his hand against them. The cloth feels tighter than ever now, and he slips his hand under his shirt as he pries at it to loosen its hold. It does little but spark more discomfort, until he unhooks one of the strips from where it had been tucked in.

“What are you doing?” Ghost’s voice startles him, having taken a tone like John was a child caught doing something he shouldn’t.

“They’re too tight,” John slurs. “Needs changing anyway.”

He can feel more than see the way Ghost looks him over, and he shivers under the intensity of the gaze.

“Right now?” Ghost asks, and John knows what he means by the question, even if he won’t say it outloud. John was hardly in a fit condition, but the itch under his skin was biting into him relentlessly. Something felt wrong, although he couldn’t quite formulate the words on his tongue to specify exactly what. He just knew they needed changing.

“Preferably,” John grunts, struggling to sit up in his weakened state. He struggles more with the shirt, tossing it to the side before he begins unraveling the mess around his torso in slow, sluggish movements. They come off lazily as he takes his time, Ghost standing from the rug to get the leftover scraps from last time. John misses the stray strip he throws his way, and allows it to lay where it falls as he moves to grasp the water skin and bring it close for when it is needed.

Ghost sits down across from him, watching him strip the layers away. The top of the wound begins to show, and John makes a face at the inflamed skin peeking through. It looked somehow worse for wear, and he knew it didn’t bode well for the rest of what lay beneath. Still he pries and peels, groaning as the last of the thin cloth clings to him.

The wound is a gnarly, ugly thing, much as he expected it to be. The lacerations were dark and puffy, pus oozing in places where infection had caught. He hears Ghost curse under his breath, sharing much of the same sentiments that John felt.

If infection had set in, a fever was only just one of their worries.

John reaches for the waterskin, but finds it taken from his hand when he goes to uncup it, Ghost prying it from his hand and tipping it over the strip of cloth he had tossed earlier himself.

“Lay back,” he orders, and John grumbles something about doing it himself under his breath but complies all the same, too tired to argue with the man. Sated, Ghost leans forward on his knees, hovering over John’s torso as he sets the wet cloth to skin. John hisses at the contact, the unavoidable sting as he cleans out and around the infected areas. It was uncomfortable at best, a small piece of hell at worst.

“Don’t suppose you keep any salves around,” John gasps as Ghost digs into a more tender part to push the infection out. He grits his teeth, letting out a frustrated breath as Ghost presses in harder. He knew it was necessary, but it hurt like a fucking bitch.

“I’m not a doctor,” Ghost replies quietly, but to John it sounded almost like he was apologizing. John couldn’t possibly understand what for. Hell, he had gotten him this far.

“Wild Barley, and Yarrow. Vinegar, if you have.” John recounts off the top of his head. The vinegar would sting, but he thinks he remembers Doc talking something up about it for medicinal purposes.

Ghost chuckles, surprised.

“Where’d you learn that?” He asks, moving onto the next deep cut, clearing out between the folds of severed skin in a way that leaves John hissing.

“Helped Doc out last Spring for a time,” Is all he can supply. He grasps a fist full of fur by his thigh as Ghost works, trying to keep his whining down to a minimum. Being perceived as weak had always been a sore point against his pride, but somehow it felt double under the hands of Ghost; Like he had something to prove to the man, although he flounders for what. Ghost had already seen John at his worst, and now was no exception to that.

“I’m almost done,” Ghost murmurs. “And yeah, I should have some of

that. I can...try.”

John is the one who doesn't reply this time, too absorbed in the pain to think of much else, but he hears him. As the last of the pus and ooze is cleared, John sighs a breath of relief when Ghost takes his hands away. The flesh of his stomach is left tender and irritated, but thankfully clean when John looks down. At least the hard part of it was over.

He goes to sit up, reposition himself, but a warm hand settles back on his shoulder, pushing him back into place.

“Rest for a minute, I'll make the salve,” Ghost says, and John listens only because the movement had left spots in his vision.

Ghost gets up and walks over to the table then, fiddling with what John assumes are the herbs and grains he had mentioned. Nothing but the sound of his rustling fills the cabin, and neither of them speak to fill in the gaps. John welcomes it all the same, closing his eyes as he waits for the pain to subside into something more gentle before they invoke its wrath again.

John wouldn't pretend to know how long it takes to make a salve, that had always been Doc's job, but somewhere in between trying to stay awake and slipping into slumber on accident again, he notes that Ghost was taking his time. It wasn't a case of John minding, more like he was concerned that the man was struggling, and he peaks through lowered lashes to see him pour a dose of water into a pestle before mixing it again.

John smiles secretly behind his back, because he really had no reason to try at all for a stranger like him, and yet here he was.

Ghost sets the pestle down for a moment, staring at it before he's picking it up again, bringing it over to John and tipping it in his direction.

They both look at it, and Ghost shifts in his stance, as though he were unsure.

“Like this?” He asks, and John has to fight back another smile that threatens because for a single moment, he had somehow thought the giant of a man cute, and that was somehow the funniest thing that had happened since he got here.

“Yeah, looks like it should,” He supplies truthfully, winning the fight

over the grin threatening to spill over. He places a palm over his forehead under the cloth. Yeah, he still had a fever. It would explain his nonsense, anyway.

Ghost nods once before sitting, picking up a clean bandage strip and wrapping it around his fingers before dipping it into the salve. He hovers, another glimpse of him being unsure again, before he's running the medicine over the wounds. He's gentle with his touch, but the sting still leaves John winded as the fingers run along the ridges and rifts. The only sound between them is John's shuddering breaths, but eventually the deed is done, and Ghost sets his tools to the side, unwinding the now dirtied cloth.

"Can you sit up?" He questions, gathering the clean bandages into his lap while John grunts his affirmative. He positions himself in front of Ghost, raising his arms when prompted and allowing Ghost to redress his wounds.

Not a word is said between them again until the last bandage is firmly tucked into place, and it's broken by John's tired sigh of relief.

"Thank ye," He murmurs, running a hand down his torso and checking for loose bits. He finds none, and he pulls his borrowed shirt back to him and over his head.

"You're welcome," comes Ghost's stilted reply, as though the polite words were foreign to him. "Go back to sleep. We'll check again tomorrow."

John has nothing to fight him for, and so he simply mutters his complacency and settles back into the furs with a thump, the whole ordeal taking a toll on him as his body relaxes, tension leaving him in waves.

"One of these days you're going to have to make a second bed," He mumbles as Ghost goes to lay upon the rug. It had meant to be a passing thought, but the fever had loosened his lips it seemed.

Ghost pauses in getting comfortable, and John can practically hear his thoughts churning about the implication of his words.

"Worry about yourself," Is all he says, and John listens to him as sleep overtakes him again.

As though he wasn't enough in the waking world, John dreams of Ghost.

He finds them both down in the village, as though Ghost had always lived there. John finds him everywhere, as though Ghost was as much a part of his life as all the others. If he dreams of the farm, he finds Ghost tending the dirt by his side. If he dreams of the pub, Ghost is sat across from him tending a pint. He's beside Doc as they flit between patients, and he finds him speaking in low tones to Alejandro and Rudy while they play dice in their cottage.

Bizarrely, they still share Ghost's cabin, as though it had grown legs and meandered down the mountainside to settle in the spot John's had been before. It's oddly domestic, as though Ghost had always been a centerpoint to John's life. They move about their lives in a sort of companionship to one another. Not quite the same as Alejandro and Rudy, but something uniquely theirs all the same.

It's...nice.

Until one day Ghost disappears.

He wakes to find him simply gone one day. What had become their home had become a sole resider of one. He finds him not in the fields or tending to any of their usual hideaways. When he asks, he's met with looks of confusion. It was as though Ghost had never existed within the village at all. As simply as he had come to exist, he was just as quick to hide away again.

-

John's head is still throbbing when he comes to the waking world. He doesn't care about the time, too engrossed in the heat of his body to do more than kick off the furs. He's slow to come to, but he recognizes as another wet cloth is placed on his forehead, and sighs into the feeling as the cold washes over him, soothing.

He blinks once, twice, before his vision clears enough to look up at Ghost, posted by his bed.

Dreams must still cling to him and leave his mind blurry and fatigued because he can't help as the words tumble out of him.

"Thought you'd left," he says weakly, eyes fluttering between open

and closed, his vision peppering in and out with each flicker. Ghost is both a smudge among the backdrop, and somehow crystal clear and he reaches out a hand to graze Ghost's knee; To check if he was real. Ghost gently pulls his leg out of reach, but it was enough that John knew he was there.

"I'm not going anywhere Johnny. Go back to bed."

"Johnny," he repeats slowly, tasting every syllable. "Already coming up with pet names?" He huffs a laugh that wrenches a cough from his throat, and he brings up a hand to smother it as each one ransacks his body.

Ghost doesn't respond, only reaches out to adjust the cloth that had slipped as John had hacked out his lungs.

"Johnny is nice," John replies for him, but it's slurred as the haze of sleep finds him again.

-

The dreams come and go, and with them so does Ghost. Sometimes they're in the cabin, sometimes they're in the mountains. They never meander back down to the village, but John finds he doesn't mind. They share hunts and the meager cabin grows into their own, two beds smooshed into their respective corners. When Ghost is gone, John doesn't wonder where he goes. Sometimes he follows him, but he never makes it to the end.

In the real world, one tainted by the dreams that cling to him with claws as deep as the wounds on his belly, he never finds Ghost far. He thinks Ghost speaks to him, but the hushed tones never make it much farther than the air about his ears. He thinks he speaks back, but he can't be sure of the words that tumble and ricochet off his tongue. Everything between the dreams is a mirage of the forgotten, lost as soon as sleep caresses him back in.

It's an endless abyss of space before Ghost's voice penetrates the fog, and John rises out of it to meet him, eyes fluttering open to find the man hovered over him. He can't quite make out the words that beckon him, but as each moment passes they clear a little more of the clouds that fill his mind.

"Can you sit up?" Ghost seems to say again, and John mumbles out something that sounds a lot like 'maybe' before a hand is gripping his bicep, slowly maneuvering him into a slouched, pathetic excuse of

upright.

“Whit’re we daein?” John garbles as he attempts to not fall backwards again, accent thick as Ghost pries at him to lift his arms.

“English, Johnny,” Ghost huffs, perhaps in irritation, when John’s arms don’t make it very far. When that fails him, he instead helps to move his arm free of the tunic he wears, and when it’s half off he pulls the damned thing over his head, letting it fall off the other arm when John makes no attempt to help him.

“Sorry,” He doesn’t clarify, and Ghost just sighs at him again.

“Make this a little less difficult, will you?” He grunts as he fiddles with the bandages around John’s waist and chest, attempting to unravel them, for what John still doesn’t know.

“Awa’ an’ bile yer heid,” John swats at the hands in offense, and Ghost bats him away just as lazily, not much bark or bite in the state John was in.

“I need to make sure the salve is working,” Ghost states, as though his motions were obvious and John hums because that makes more sense now. Why hadn’t he just said that?

John sits complacent as Ghost strips him of his bandages, doing nothing to help him as he puts all his focus into staying awake. He briefly recognizes the discomfort as the last of them are pulled away, but it’s dim in the murky depths of his mind.

Ghost says something, and John must not respond fast enough because the next thing John knows he’s being pushed onto his back, blinking rapidly and trying to figure out how he had gotten there.

“Ay, at least take me out to dinner first,” He mumbles, a frown taking over his features as indignation sets in at being manhandled.

“I’ve fed you plenty,” Ghost rolls his eyes. “Now stay still.”

John grumbles but does as he says as Ghost sets about wiping the old salve away and applying the new. He’s conscious enough to recognize the pain as it comes, and somewhere in the wisps of his mind he notes that it wasn’t as nearly as irritated as before. Which meant that somehow the salve was doing its job, and John adds another notch to the tally of things he owes Ghost for.

They fall into an easy silence as Ghost works, and before John can wrap his mind around anything the bandages are firmly back in place. He's aware that he should thank Ghost, but he can't quite be arsed as he falls back against the bed, tucked from the whole ordeal of it all and left wondering if it was even worth the trouble.

-

The next time he comes around, Ghost is missing from his usual spot. John worries for only a moment before the scent of what he presumed was dinner fills his senses, and he's grateful the cabin is empty for the grumble his stomach lets out at the prospect.

Sure enough, Ghost hadn't trodden far as the door is opened and closed, more wood under his arm. He spots John's gaze in an instant, and he nods.

"Good, food's done," He rumbles, crossing the room to throw the logs onto the withering stack.

Before John has much to say on the matter, a bowl is being thrust in his direction, and he pulls himself weakly into sitting before accepting it. The broth slops messily over the side as he takes it, and he hisses as it scalds his skin.

"Careful, would you?" Ghost says sarcastically, and John raises his brow. He was just full of surprises.

"Not for trying," He replies in the same tone, or about as much as he could. He presses the bowl against his chest for extra leverage as he fumbles for the spoon, taking in the soup and the finely minced meat within, as though Ghost knew he wouldn't be up much for chewing.

He sips gingerly, lest he burn his tongue as he had his hand, and nearly groans as the flavor slides against his tongue.

"Aye, that's good," He sighs.

"Bone broth has a habit of doing that," Ghost replies. He had ladeled his own bowl and had his back as usual to John, but it had become so routine John barely even minds it.

He expects for their meal to be just as silent as the last, but Ghost must be in a talkative mood because after a few moments he breaks it.

"Your fever broke a little while ago. How do you feel?"

“Like I got mauled by a mountain cat. Could be worse,” John jokes after a moment. It wasn’t much of a joke outside of the truth, but he made it anyway.

“That all?” Ghost drawls, and John watches as his shoulders shake just a moment in mirth, although no sound makes it beyond where Ghost sits.

“Awfully chatty tonight, aren’t you?” John smiles around the spoon that he brings to his mouth, but it seems to bring out the opposite effect as Ghost falls back into his silence, nothing but the sound of their slow eating filling the room.

“Nothin’ wrong with that. Being chatty that is,” John amends when he thinks his antics stretch too far. The last thing he wanted to do was ruin Ghost’s apparent good mood.

“I imagine you would think that,” Ghost retorts after a moment, and John raises his eyebrows in mock offense.

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Means you hardly shut up,” Ghost throws over his shoulder, and John catches the slightest curve of a strong jawline peppered with blonde stubble before it’s hidden again. It shouldn’t, but it feels more like a tease than the words he had traded his way, and it leaves John floundering.

“Well perhaps you don’t talk nearly enough, *Ghost*.”

“Perhaps I have nothing to say, *John*.”

The name sparks something low in John’s chest, and he huffs out a laugh as he mistakes it for humor.

“What, no pet name now?” He quips, smile dancing playfully across his lips.

“Not with your incessant attitude,” Ghost scoffs back.

“Awa' an' bile yer heid,” he groans. Ghost had hardly seen a thing of his attitude.

“English.”

“Sorry, let me translate,” He rolls his eyes. “Go fuck yourself,”

“That’s better.”

John simmers down into a flutter of laughter, and although he hears nothing from Ghost’s side of the room he knows the man is in a similar state of amusement, if his tone was anything to go by. The room settles from the most conversation it had probably ever seen, and John is sated - by both meal and companionship.

-

Morning arises the next day, a soft pale light gilding the windows golden as the sun carts its way into the early sky. John stretches like a cat in the ray of light, delighted by the warmth that seems to bore down on him. He shields his hand against the bright stream, rolling over to take a lazy look around the room.

Ghost is sat in the middle of the rug again, content to stare into the fire as he so often does. John takes the sight in, wondering what the man had so much time to think about. He feels particularly sluggish in the warmth surrounding him, mind running away from him as he drinks it in. It strikes him gently that he feels content, the world coated in velvet as he lays amongst the furs.

Where before had been urgency and the need to leave, he finds the days that had passed had lulled him into a peaceful complacency. He knows that the fever no longer clings to him, so he knows there was no place to lay his excuse for why he had abandoned his earlier haste. He simply was, as they simply were, and he was content with that.

“Morning,” he yawns, stretching again for good measure.

Ghost grunts in reply, and John smiles despite himself. It would seem that Ghost’s earlier conversational side had dimmed in the light of the early day and it would be up to John to fill in the gaps.

“Anything on the agenda today?” He asks in lieu of the actual question; If Ghost were planning to leave again. Ghost hums for a moment and doesn’t reply for so long that John thinks that that had been his answer.

“Food, as usual,” Ghost supplies before John can open his mouth again. John nods as he runs a hand across his stubble, the growth itchy under his palms. He takes a moment to wonder if they have the means of a shave, before he decides to just ask.

“Ye have a razor about?”

Ghost looks over at him questioningly, and John amends.

“Growin’ a bit long,” He scratches at his jawline again. “Need a shave before it drives me bloody crazy.”

“I don’t,” Ghost says as he moves to unsheath his knife. “I just use this,” He gestures with the blade, waving it back and forth as though in invitation.

John makes a face. It would have to do. “Don’t suppose you have a mirror about either? Have a feeling I’ll knick myself on that thing otherwise.”

The cloth around where Ghost’s mouth should be twitches, as though a smirk laid beneath it. “Can’t say I do.”

John sighs, pushing back the furs and scooting himself from the bed, meeting Ghost at the rug before he raises a hand, palm up. “Give her here then, might as well get it over with.”

Ghost twists the blade to hand it over handle first, and John squirms under his gaze as he raises the sharp edge to his cheek. He lays the blade about as flat as it would go, skimming gently across his skin as he tries to cut the coarse hair. The blade is sharp enough that he feels some of the hair shear beneath it, but when he checks he finds not all of them had caught. He gingerly runs the blade along the same path again, and grumbles out in annoyance when he still finds some of them in place.

Ghost chuckles something deep in his throat, and John can feel embarrassment well up in the flush of his cheeks. “Easy for you, you’ve done it before,” he scoffs, wiping the blade across his pant leg to clear it of any hair that still sticks to it.

“Allow me?” Comes Ghost’s quiet offer after his laughter subsides, placing a hand between them as if he were unsure his offer would be taken. John stares at the palm, unsure himself.

Eventually the need for the necessary outweighs the cons of having another man hold a blade to his throat, and he hands over the knife gently. “Don’t cut me.”

“Sounds counterproductive,” Ghost says, the cloth twitching again as he leans closer.

The cool steel of the blade meets John’s cheek again, this time in the

hands of another, and he closes his eyes instinctively as it runs along his face. He feels the small patter of hair fall against his hands where they rest in his lap, and he has to stop himself from feeling if the skin were as smooth as he knew it to be. He twitches involuntarily as the blade repositions, and finds a thumb meeting his chin to hold him still, fingers curled below it.

“If you don’t want me to cut you, don’t move so much,” Ghost orders, but his voice is quiet - as gentle as the hand that holds him still and as stern as the one that wields the blade. John swallows, but ceases his twitching, holding as perfectly still as he could.

Ghost works in silence as he glides the blade across John’s jawline, perfectly in control as he continues to hold his chin. John hardly breathes as he switches sides, swapping his hold but hand just as deft as his other. The blade kisses his lips when he works along his lipline and John can feel his breath against it, shallow.

“Lift your head?” Ghost asks quietly even as his hand guides John’s head back until his neck is bared. John swallows again and peers down at him as his eyes flutter open. Ghost keeps his gaze intently on the skin exposed, not seeming to notice John’s eyes on him as he presses the knife to the hollow of his throat. John is sure that Ghost can feel his pulse, a rapid stuttering thing, as the blade runs along his pulse point, but if he does he doesn’t comment on it.

He could so easily slit John’s throat. John forces himself not to swallow.

But that was the thing about Ghost, wasn’t it? Time and again he had done nothing but help John, out of his own mercy. He could have left John to bleed in the forest. He could have let him succumb to his wounds as he laid with fever and infection. There was nothing in it to gain for the man, and yet he helped John without repayment. Even now, he knew Ghost asked nothing of it. That kind of kindness didn’t exist in most places.

“Why?” He breathes as the knife runs up from the base of his neck to his jaw.

“Hmm?”

“Why do you help me?” John murmurs as the blade halts its path. He feels the now warmed blade leave his skin and watches as Ghost’s eyes slot to meet his. Something flickers across the expanse of iris’, something deeper than what they could share, before Ghost is looking

away again.

“It’s what you do, when someone needs help,” He replies in the same tone, repositioning the blade at the base of his throat again. When John doesn’t reply, he runs it up its final trek, pulling away when the last of his stubble is cleared.

John runs a hand across his face and down his neck, finding it smooth under his fingers for the first time in days.

“Thanks,” John says a moment late, after Ghost had turned away from him, wiping the knife along his pant leg. He doesn’t reply, but John watches his head tilt in acknowledgement as the man pushes himself into standing.

“What other talents are you hiding?” John speaks, not knowing if the man was preparing to leave but somehow still wanting him to stay a little longer. The sun wasn’t so high in the sky now that they didn’t have time. There was something antsy under John’s skin and talking was the only thing he could think of to smother it.

“Anything bred of necessity,” Comes Ghost’s rumble as he flits over to where his cloak hangs. He brings it down into his hands before he’s pulling it over his broad shoulders.

“Which is?”

Ghost regards him with dark eyes behind the skull, like he knew John was stalling him but couldn’t fathom as to why. “Does it matter?”

John stumbles for a reply, because at the end of the day no, it didn’t. Part of the charm of Ghost was learning just exactly what he was capable of and he didn’t know if he wanted easy answers. He runs a hand along the top of his head, and notes the new growth under his fingers with the same disdain as he had his stubble.

When John doesn’t answer him, Ghost turns away towards the door again, taking the knob in hand and twisting it open. He gives John one last cursory look, but then he is gone again.

Chapter End Notes

Hello friends!

I will be taking a few days to properly sit down and outline this. It's why the chapter is so short lol. But im a little lost in the sauce

rn and need to put some of these ideas in order lol.

So chapter four will not be coming just as quickly, but it will be longer :)

Thank you so much for your patience and for reading! You're all so wonderful!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I wrote half of this with a fever, so if it doesn't make sense, that's why babes.

Love u.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They fall into a routine, uniquely their own, in the following days, and each day John learns a little bit more about the man he shares the cabin with.

He can sew, for one, which he learns on the second day when Ghost comes back with a hole in his cloak, courtesy of being caught on a branch, he says. He has traps set around the cabin in case a stray hunt should find him instead, which he finds out after he returns far too quickly with another hare. Sometimes, when he thinks John is well asleep, he will hum to himself as he works about the cabin, low and rumbling. That was one of John's favorite discoveries. They trade barbs in their downtime, and John learns he has a terrible sense of humor. It's probably one of the more comfortable things about him.

It strikes him somewhere on the fourth day that he enjoys Ghost's company, as few and far in between as it may be. Ghost doesn't disappear much anymore, at least not before telling John where he's going, although some days he still keeps his secrets. John doesn't find that he minds much, and he doesn't question farther than he's allowed. He learns the different buttons that make Ghost tick, and finds which ones not to press.

Somewhere on the fifth day he finds himself laying with his back against the rug, watching Ghost whittle away something or another. He isn't sure what the craft is yet, and he fiddles with his own tiny mountain lion on his belly. It needed to be sanded yet, but he was waiting for Ghost to get there before he asked him to teach him again.

Ghost's mask is placed off to the side, drawing an oddly peaceful picture of him with it not being in its usual place. John finds that he likes it better that way, but keeps that particular opinion to himself. He knew not why Ghost continued to wear it, but knew it must be important to him if he kept it around. The fact that he would take it off at all with John's wandering eyes was a delicate act of trust, and

John knew better than to break it.

He thinks he can see the outline of the bridge of his nose, hooked as though it had been broken before. As they sit in their easy company of one another, John wonders just how he had gotten it. Had it been an accident? Or was it from a before time, before he had found himself alone in this cabin so deep into the mountainside. As he lays there, he ponders if he'll ever know; If they'll ever reach a time in knowing one another where Ghost would so willingly give up that kind of information.

It isn't in him to doubt, not fully. They'd come so far already in knowing one another that John almost felt greedy to ask for more. To *want* for more. It was as strange as his host, the feeling that churned inside John's gut, and it left him more often at a loss than anything else. Ghost was an enigma, that much was for sure, but slowly John had crafted an image of him that was bred more of truth than just speculation, and where Ghost left John curious, that was where he needed. He wanted to fill out the picture that was half painted, but found the image shifting every time he got too close.

But for all the man was, John found he couldn't fault him. Quite the opposite. Ghost had his quirks, but John had grown to become quite fond of his quiet company. Where before John might have considered him difficult, he now found him to be easy - one just had to learn how to approach him, is all. It was a slow dance, what with coming to fathom all that Ghost was, but John was beginning to enjoy their rhythm.

"Not like you to be this quiet," Ghost comments suddenly, breaking John away from his thoughts.

"Just thinkin' is all," He smiles languidly up at him, rolling his head to drink in the sight. Ghost's head is tilted to the side as he works, body alight in the low glow of the fire's warmth. His eyes catch on John for just a moment before they slide just as easily back down to his craft, giving nothing away as usual.

"And what would that be about?" He rumbles, voice low.

"You," John answers honestly, but in the moment it feels like he gives too much away too soon as the whittling stops. Ghost's eyes hold him for a small eternity before he's huffing what sounds remarkably like a laugh.

"Not thinking of much then," He scoffs, running the blade of the knife

up the wooden piece.

John hums, rolling his head back to stare at the ceiling. "I wouldn't say that."

"Then what would you say?" Ghost continues as he flicks a splintered piece away. The flames flicker, dancing in John's peripheral as a sly idea comes to mind, and he smiles as he takes it.

"Depends. Have I been here long enough to know your name yet?" It's meant in jest just as much as it's meant in timid trade, one he finds he desperately wants Ghost to take. He knows better than to hope, but it does nothing for the *want*. He knows he should know better by now.

Ghost sits in his silence, nothing but the sound of his wood carving to fill the gap between them.

"It's Ghost, is it not?" Comes Ghost's easy answer after a minute, eyes straying back to him with a crinkle around their edges, as though he were hiding a smile. John can't help the bark of laughter even as disappointment settles somewhere in his chest.

"Then I guess you'll have to figure it out yourself."

-

John stunk.

It's his first thought of the day as he awakens with a grumble to his own smell. He hadn't had a proper wash since the day before the hunt, and he was in desperate need to rid himself of his natural body odor. Disheveled, he sits up in the bed, taking in Ghost's absence with a sense of relief - he preferred doing this particular task in private.

There was, of course, no telling when the man would lumber on back in, but if he had set off so early it would be expected he would be gone for at least a while. As he rises, he runs a hand along where Ghost usually rests on the rug and finds it no warmer than what the fire could provide. He had already been gone for a while. Best to make it quick, then.

He sets about getting his boots on, praying the well was deep enough below the frost line to provide a source of water. There was more than enough fresh snow to fill in the gap should it be too shallow, but John wanted to avoid that if he could. He finds the pot on the table and grabs for it thankfully, inspecting it and finding it clean.

He makes his way into the early morning, the cool air hitting the back of his throat with a bite when he inhales too sharply. His breath is lost on a lazy wind, and he watches it tumble to the trees on the updraft, towards towering clouds that spoke heavy of more snow to come. He makes his way to the well and gives the rope a cautionary tug, finding it loose and listening to the slosh of water that echoes from within. With a quiet cheer he makes the task of pulling the rope on its hinge, dragging the bucket to the surface loudly as it creaks. As it crests into view, he sets the pot on the stone wall, dumping the water into its hollow body until it not quite brims the lip.

He hurriedly sends the bucket back down, the chill of the air digging into his poorly dressed form as he makes his way back inside, careful not to jostle the pot too much lest it spill. He settles it over the fire to warm, and then sets to the task of looking for a proper cloth to clean with. He finds a few rags coupled together in the dresser, and he plucks one for the taking, noting the piling laundry in the corner and making a note to ask Ghost how to go about cleaning them. They were mostly his afterall, and he was feeling better enough that the task wouldn't be too daunting, if a little bit on the slow side.

He tests the water intermittently, pulling it well before the boil - Wouldn't do well to scald himself. He finds a basin set off to the side of the chamber pot and pours the heated water inside, carefully dragging it across the room until he's settled in front of the fire.

Despite his haste on time, he takes it slow, removing the different clothing separately as he works lest Ghost get an eyeful that neither of them desired. In the center of the room he cleans the more intimate parts of himself, relishing in the feeling of fresh water on his skin as the musk is cleared away. He yearns for a proper bar of soap but knows he wouldn't find it out here. It was only one of the many means that Ghost could not provide for him being so far out on his own, but John would just have to settle.

When he's properly air dried and clothed again, he hauls the basin to the doorway, slipping back into his boots as he hauls it outside. He dumps half of the water over his head, leaning over at the waist so as to not douse the rest of himself. He gives a half hearted scrub to his scalp before tossing the rest over his head again, shaking like a dog to rid himself of the spare droplets that cling to him.

He scampers back towards the door, cursing as the frigid air begins to freeze the wet hairs on his head. He runs a hand through to loosen them again as he makes his way inside, setting the basin where he

found it and goes about mopping up his earlier mess. He feels refreshed, even despite the improper wash, and settles down near the fire once all is done, nothing left to do but wait for Ghost to return.

As he sits he wonders when the last time Ghost had had a proper wash. He hadn't been afforded much privacy, what with John lying about. John would feel bad if he had been putting him before his hygiene, what with how private he was. He was well enough now that he thought he could afford Ghost some time alone to properly wash, if Ghost were up for it. He'd have to ask, once he returned.

It's roughly midday before the door behind him opens, Ghost stomping the snow off his boots at the doorway before making his way inside. John catches sight of a fowl in his hand, neck gutted as he lays it on the table, going through his usual routine of stripping the gloves from his hands and hanging his cloak.

John leans back on his hands and gives him a cursory look. The man didn't *look* dirty.

"What?" Ghost asks him, eye's steady on John even as he fiddles with the cloak to lie it flat enough to dry.

"Had a wash today. Was wondering when was the last time ye had one done." John shrugs. "If ye need me to step out, I'd be -"

He stops as Ghost steps in front of him, hand hovering just above his hairline. When John can do nothing but blink up at him, frozen, fingers push to card gently through his hair and across his scalp. John doesn't move as they run through a second time, not even a breath once they leave. He can feel the way the heat rushes to his ears, bleeding softly into his cheeks as he sits, perplexed and vulnerable, wondering just what that had been about.

"So that's what was different," Ghost hums before he's moving around John, kicking off his boots next to the fire.

John, temporarily rendered mute, blinks into the empty space in front of him. It wasn't the first time Ghost had touched him, but those time's had been few, and they had always been bred from necessity. To have Ghost touch him so casually was new, and it left a restless feeling in John's stomach. Fluttering. Like he'd drank too much and the pints were dizzying his head.

"Don't worry about me," Ghost commands, voice low from his left, stepping around him and heading back towards the fowl. John

watches as he begins to pluck soft feathers from its body, laying them off to the side as he goes about his work.

“Well why not?” John unsticks his tongue, finally finding it after he had swallowed it whole.

Ghost scoffs. “Why should you?”

The question leaves John floundering, because why *shouldn't* he? The man had been nothing but gracious to him his entire stay, and despite what Ghost might think, he thinks they've traded enough time to call the other man a friend. It strikes him that maybe Ghost doesn't think that about them, and it leaves a sting of disappointment in his chest.

“Well, we're friends aren't we?” He voices, small enough that he wonders if the other man could even hear him.

“I don't keep those around, Johnny.”

The sting turns to something acrid, burning. “Well that's a shame, here I was considering ye one.”

He says it with all the heat in chest turning a wicked fire of his tongue, bitter from the clear rejection Ghost had so openly laid out in front of them. He hears Ghost sigh before he's turning around to face John, leaning up against the table, eyes dark as they peer out from under the mask. “You don't want a friend like me.”

John's face twists in defiance. “I can damn well choose that for myself, I think.”

Ghost shakes his head but doesn't argue his words. “It won't end well,” he says cryptically.

“Not if ye let me have a say in it.”

John can see the way his jaw flexes beneath the cloth, can see the want to turn John away from him and so clearly keep them from becoming more than the boundary he kept himself walled away in.

He was a fortress, built of blood and stone, but John was a battering ram, built of war and persistence. Only one of them would yield.

To John's surprise, it's Ghost.

His head ducks down, arms flexing across his chest before he's pushing away from the table with his hip, turning his back to John as

he returns to preparing the fowl.

“Whatever you say, Johnny.”

-

They eat in terrible silence.

It's a deafening trade to their earlier conversation, leaving a rancid taste in his mouth even though he had won the battle. It hadn't been something he thought he would have to fight for, wasn't something he thought he'd ever had to fight anyone before about. Friendship came so naturally in most instances that it had never occurred to him that Ghost might not want it, and it left him angry at himself that he would be so brazen as to *take* it from him.

But it left him at a loss why Ghost had even let him. If the man didn't want to be his friend, he was well within his right to refuse, although John would be hard pressed to let him. Yet here he was, and here they were, and Ghost had simply just let him after a few traded words.

John is the one to clear the bowls this time, stepping into his boots and out into dusk, scrubbing the meal's leftover residue away into the snow and attempting in the same way to wipe the permanent frown off his face. He had got what he wanted, damn it. Now it was his turn to deal with it.

He finds Ghost a shadow in the doorway, arms across his chest as he leans against the frame. He lets John pass easily enough, body following John into the warmth of the cabin, shutting the door behind them as John sets all the utensils and such back into their place. With nothing left to do, he carries his tired body over to the bed, flopping down into the furs with a grunt.

“Turning in early?” Ghost is the first to break their trade off, sitting down before the fire as he glances over at John, as if he was more than aware of John's sour mood.

“Aye,” John grumbles, setting an arm across his eyes. “Probably for the best.”

He hears a rustle from across the room, peering out from under his forearm as he watches Ghost get comfortable. He watches his form stretch out, laying down on his back with a barely audible grunt of his

own.

John feels a flurry of guilt settle in his chest as he looks on. Ghost had been nothing but courteous about letting John keep the bed, even after his healing had progressed well beyond needing it. He knew Ghost wouldn't let him take the floor so long as he was there. That was just the type of person that Ghost was.

He makes a decision.

"Ghost?" He calls.

He can see from where he lies that Ghost doesn't open his eyes, but his head tilts towards him in question.

"Do ye ever get tired of sleeping on the floor?"

Ghost hums, neither confirmation nor denial, like he had nothing to think about sleeping on the floor for nearly two weeks. It couldn't be comfortable, John knows, and yet Ghost had made no complaint.

John braves his way. There was no turning back now.

"I figure the bed is big enough for two."

Ghost's eyes do open then, staring towards the ceiling before he sits up to regard John. They give nothing away as he stares at him, face half coated in soft shadow. John feels himself swallow when Ghost doesn't answer, and finds his mouth loosened by the action.

"Might be a tight squeeze, but I promise to keep my hands to myself," he jokes.

When still he gets no answer, he offers a shrug instead. "Friends don't let other friends sleep on the floor."

"Is that so?" Ghost murmurs, and John feels his heart thunder as Ghost moves to stand, padding over to the makeshift pile of furs where John had nestled in. John scrambles into the far corner, unsure if Ghost was making good on his offer or not but wanting to clear the way, the other man indecipherable as he looks down at him.

With his back against the wall, he moves the covers over to allow Ghost entrance, and watches as Ghost dips his knees into the edge of the furs. He had half expected to be turned away, but now with Ghost so close he was pressed to wonder how they had even gotten here.

Perhaps the floor was just as uncomfortable as John knew it to be. Maybe Ghost was just fed up with not getting a decent night's rest. John doesn't have it in him to ask.

"Aye," He nods instead, Ghost laying out his body horizontal to John's.

Ghost rolls his head to look him over once before he's turning away onto his side, removing the mask and gently placing it by the waterskin. John breathes a quiet sigh of relief as the guilt stutters out of his chest, and follows suit until they're back to back. The bed isn't quite big enough that if John moves, he won't find his back brushing against him, but it's enough that he can mostly make good on his promise. He wrestles into something more comfortable, willing his body to still.

It takes a while before his heart settles, listening in for the quiet snores that never seem to come. He stares blankly at the wooden wall, waiting for sleep to take hold of him, but where it had been so desperate before he finds it desolate now, and he curses somewhere in the depths of his mind.

If he listens, he can hear the near silent inhale and exhale of his companion under the gentle cackle of flame, and he counts the breaths as he waits for somnus' gentle hold.

It's a long time before sleep finds either of them.

-

When John awakens through a fitful sleep come morning, he knows Ghost is gone again. Can feel his vacancy even before he turns over, the bedspace cool to the touch where he had laid before.

With his absence so acute, John wonders briefly if he had made a mistake, in dragging Ghost into bed with him. He knew the man was capable of making his own decisions, but he couldn't help but worry with Ghost not there to fill in the gaps of his wanderings. He'd barely been able to sleep as it were, and he knew from the lack of snoring throughout the night that Ghost hadn't been much better off.

It was a strange new dynamic to their budding 'friendship', and John willed it to be something it probably wasn't. He supposed he could offer that they sleep in turns, if the prospect of being so close to John was too much for him. He slaps a hand across his forehead for not thinking of that first - he just hadn't wanted to leave Ghost stuck on

that damned rug and had run with the first thought that had come to mind.

He fiddles with the blankets as he watches the light snowfall outside, seemingly having come in the night. Sleep still clings to him, and he fights to keep his eyes open, drifting in and out of a hazy rest as the morning passes on without him.

-

They don't speak of the night before. They don't speak much of anything as the night draws in its close. John does the dishes again and Ghost waits for him in the doorway again, keeping his shadow in the light of the doorway, and then they spend the rest of the evening settled on the rug, neither making a move to do much other than share each other's company. Ghost stares into the fire and John stares at the ceiling, but despite it all, John thinks the only one who feels the awkward air in himself.

He knows it's because of his reckless behavior - his do before he truly thinks. It had always been a bad habit of his, but usually it didn't pester him as much as it did tonight. He knows he could make his offer of taking turns, but finds his tongue rooted to the roof of his mouth whenever he goes to speak, too afraid to voice his thoughts into the space of the room; Too afraid of the feeling of rejection should Ghost find relief in his offer.

As the night draws in all around them and John can feel his eyes begin to droop, hot from the flame of the fire, a yawn peters out into the room without much of his permission. He stretches languidly, careful of the wounds that still have yet to fully scab over, before he finds himself boneless amongst the rug, tired. He can feel Ghost's gaze drop down to watch him, and he returns the look with half lidded eyes. They don't speak, but John is sure his intentions are clear as he rises to crawl over to the bedspace.

He gathers into the furs, bypassing the middle to press himself against the wall. As he adjusts, he makes sure to leave plenty of room for Ghost, and when he turns onto his side he finds him unmoved but watching, eyes low.

John knows the night is late, and knows Ghost must be as tired from the night before just as much as John was. He should make his offer, really he should, but he finds his tongue barren of that as they trade their looks in turn.

When Ghost makes no move to follow, John lifts the pelts in invitation, if only to convey that he truly didn't mind, even if last night had been one of their strangest affairs yet.

John can see the way Ghost's fingers curl into themselves slowly, can see the way he back straightens as his eyes run along John's laid out form, like he was deciding. Something must war in the depths of his mind, because he lets John's hand go limp. Finally, that seems to do the trick, because he's standing to cross the meager space between them, crawling into the space at the edge of the bed much like he had the night before.

They don't speak as he removes the mask, nor when he rolls with his back turned to John, the fire painting his outline in a vibrant orange hue. John takes in the curve of his spine, the way the fur rests over his hips. The swell of his bicep and the patch of pale skin that shows of his neck as the tunic buckles and slopes. A divot, right between his shoulder blades, and John clenches the hand that reaches without permission to run across it. To feel the muscle underneath.

What wasn't fair, that Ghost could touch him so freely, and yet John had to hesitate. John shakes his head to rid it of the thought.

He lets the hand fall, watching as each breath rises and falls away, unaware.

As he regards Ghost's form, he finally has the time and space to remember the way his fingers had run through his hair, the way they had danced across his scalp. He couldn't speak of Ghost's intentions, or what had brought on the casual touch, but he could remember the heat of his ears and the thud of blood in his veins.

Perhaps there was more to Ghost than he thought, more to them. Ghost didn't keep friends, but he was easy with his company. Ghost thought it was a bad idea, but he had relented all the same, if anything to pacify John. It was too much to hope that Ghost wanted this as much as John did, whatever 'this' was, but he wanted to.

He lays there wondering until his thoughts droop his eyes down low and sleep beckons him in deeper.

He falls asleep listening to the sound of Ghost's soft breathing.

-

The cabin is dark when John's eyes open again, slow and wading

through the darkness as he tries to make sense of what had awoken him. Heavy was the weight of his chest, warm in a way that the cabin was otherwise not - cooling as the fire had diminished into nothing but embers. Moonlight cascades down across the floor, the only other illumination to aid John's tired eyes, and as they adjust he figures out just what had awakened him.

Ghost's soft snores are louder now, what with being directly in the crook of his shoulder, his strong arm laid upon John's chest. His leg is otherwise hooked around John's calf, and he can feel the way the cloth that wraps Ghost's head scratches against his cheek. John had somehow moved to lay upon his back, giving full access it seemed for Ghost to move in across him, and he feels his heart thud almost painfully in his chest as a soft groan rumbles against his neck.

Despite the cool of the air, John can feel his face heat, a blush blooming across his cheeks and across his ears. Deep enough that he's sure it's run down his throat. His left arm is squashed between the two of them, uncomfortable in the way it was still fast asleep without the rest of his body to follow.

Ghost's body is spooned around him, and his first thought is that it isn't wholly unpleasant.

Quite the opposite.

John finds the line of his body nearly captivating, every point of touch like a bolt of electricity. The hot feel of Ghost's breath against the juncture of his neck, despite the cloth. John wants nothing but to curl into the warmth, to follow the path that Ghost's sleeping form had laid out for them, but knows his movement would just startle the man. He knows Ghost would recoil, turn away from him again. Knows it so clearly it keeps him stark still, afraid to lose the feeling of him.

Oh.

Oh.

John wasn't an idiot, despite the few that might say otherwise. He knew the feeling well enough in his gut now that he wondered how he hadn't noticed it earlier.

John was attracted to him.

Attracted to the whole of him. The way he had taken care of John when it wasn't his responsibility, the way he humored him. The

feeling of his fingers through his hair and the rough grit of his voice. His hands and his scars and the way he hums and the sound of his snores. The way he called him Johnny. The mystery of him and all that he knew.

John was attracted to him, and now their bodies were entwined and there was nothing he could do about it.

He carefully runs his free hand across his face, feeling the heat that still laid upon it.

He was attracted to Ghost.

He wants to laugh, at the absurdity of it all. He didn't know his true name, or his face. Didn't know where he came from or what would happen to them once he left. All he knew was that he was harboring a crush on one of the most reclusive, unavailable men - probably for hundreds of miles - and it hadn't even taken him much to get here.

John hadn't even known that he wasn't straight, of all things. Sure, he'd appreciated a good looking man every now and then. Would even say he'd grown envious of Alejandro and Rudy, having each other and loving one another so deeply - wanting something like that for his own. But he'd never considered his type to be a mountain dwelling giant, more gracious and gentle than any man he'd ever known. More caring than half the people in his life, when before they had been only strangers.

John wants to groan, can feel it stutter in his chest. He *liked* Ghost.

And Ghost had shown not a single sign that he would be interested in John the same way.

Perhaps John was an idiot after all, falling for the man. He had been nothing but a good host and John had to go and muck it all up. Ghost hadn't even wanted to be *friends*. He would never settle for anything beyond that, to be *lovers* of all things. The thought makes John's face heat up again.

Lovers.

God, he was a goner, wasn't he?

He feels Ghost shift in, closer as he murmurs something in his sleep, the bridge of his nose digging deeper into John's neck. John can do nothing but exhale slowly, and cautiously, he squirms into something

more comfortable, lolling his head to gently rest against Ghost's. When the man doesn't stir, John breathes a sigh of relief and closes his eyes.

Ghost would wake up eventually, and he would remove himself from John gently and never speak a word of it, but until then John could enjoy the feeling of his body against his.

-

Morning comes despite John's pleas to never rise. As he had predicted, Ghost was gone from him and all that was left was the remnants of memories, the feel of him ingrained into John's skin.

Fuck, he was attracted to Ghost.

He sits up, finding the cabin empty but a new fire built in the hearth. In a way, he was sore that he had missed Ghost's reaction to them, or maybe lack of reaction. There was no telling if he had rolled away in the middle of the night, but it would do well to keep such a rejection in place, lest John go about opening his damn mouth and spouting something stupid.

There was no telling how the man would take his apparent fancy, either. He knew some people felt strongly about same sex couples, although the village he had settled in was lax with Alejandro and Rudy. He knew it had taken a while for them to find a place to call home, although they didn't talk about the journey much. He could only wonder what Ghost would think, and he bit his lip in the quiet of the room. For all he knew, it could end badly.

There was also another problem he needed to consider in his apparent attraction, and that was the fact that any day now he should be making his leave.

He had borrowed enough of Ghost's time and space. Surely the man could see he was well enough to go. Why he hadn't carted him out the door by now was as much of a mystery as any. It was too much to think Ghost had grown fond of his company, what with his stint about not keeping friends, but John cautiously let the hope worm its way into his heart. Maybe Ghost was as lonely as his little cabin in the woods. Maybe, despite his theatrics, he was in desperate need of company.

But maybe that was his attraction talking, the want for Ghost to want him.

-

Ghost comes back with another hunt around midday, and John offers to help prepare the meal, if only to find a reason to stand by Ghost's side. Ghost doesn't question him, merely hands over a handful of mushrooms he had scavenged and sets about plucking the feathers of the fowl he had found.

They work in the silence of one another, John's heart stuttering every time they so much as brush one another in their close company. If Ghost can tell, he says nothing about the twitch of John's hands every time it happens, as though John's jittery nature wasn't obvious. John quarters and slices through the shrooms, adding them to the pot as he goes while Ghost does the same with the meat. At some point, their hands meet in the middle, and John misses the pot in the way he retracts his hand so violently, scattering mushrooms across the table.

"Sorry," He mumbles, gathering them up and into the pot. He can feel Ghost's eyes on him, but he keeps his head low and his hands back to the task.

Way to not make things obvious.

Ghost doesn't say anything as he slowly goes back to his work, and when John finishes with the mushroom he leans against the table with his hip, watching Ghost's large hands as they cut and pry the meat from the bone.

Eventually Ghost must have enough of his staring, because as he finishes wiping his hands he mirrors John, hip to the table and his arms across his chest, looking down at him with an indecipherable gaze.

"What's wrong with you then?" He asks.

John knows his eyes are wide, caught. He shakes his head, trying to clear the look off his face. "Nothin's wrong."

"Something's wrong," Ghost deadpans, and John watches as his arms clench around him, as though he's got the idea figured out. The thought that John could be so transparent terrifies him.

"Just thinkin' is all," John answers, and it's part way the truth he supposes. Ghost was all he could think about, had been all morning and still is even now. He needed to temper it down, lest he be found out all too soon.

Ghost stares down at him for a long moment, but looks away far too soon - or maybe not fast enough, his dark eyes darting to the side as he grabs the pot.

“Figure it out will you?” He grunts, pushing away from the table and in the direction of the fireplace without so much as a backwards glance.

When he’s well far away enough, John breathes a sigh of relief. “Not for tryin’,”

Chapter End Notes

Ya'll this is a journey.

But im so grateful for the support <3 Thank you for all the wonderful comments and kudos <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

John didn't know what to do with his new found attraction to Ghost, the pull of it following him wherever he went - Which wasn't far in the confines of the cabin, but it was still just as suffocating.

It left an ache in his skin every time Ghost laid beside him for the night, or where they would accidentally brush in their everyday tasks. He was so acutely aware of wherever Ghost was that he could only just bear to stand it. It was as all consuming as it was intoxicating.

If Ghost was aware of his distress, he only acknowledged it with searching glances. He had to know something had changed in John, but whatever he chalked it up to be, he didn't comment - in his usual fashion. John was grateful that the topic wasn't brought up again. He still didn't know how to navigate through the waters of their company now that he knew he was too deep to swim. Being around Ghost was like treading the deepest of them, and he knew before long he would end up with a mouth full of water.

The river that sat between them felt a mile wide, and John was without raft or row. He didn't know what to do with the current that separated them, only knew he wanted to cross the divide so fiercely, to anchor in Ghost's mysterious shores and map them until his hands turned bloody. His attraction was an all consuming front, and it doubled down in the days that followed them.

Everything Ghost did was carved in a new light - his hands, his body, the way he moved. The steps he made, nearly silent on the hardwood floors. The bare of his feet - sharp and angular. The roll of his shoulders as he worked, the cut of his hips and the long path of his legs. John carded it all into his mind like a man without time - something he was losing the more he healed. The heavy hand of the clock was ever moving, and John could do nothing but bow to it.

He was like a child with a new crush, and perhaps he was, the way he found ways to insert himself into Ghost's space. Never touching, always aware of the boundary he had set so early into their company, but it wasn't for lack of wanting. He wanted to follow him wherever he went like a dog leashed, and if he wasn't so desperate to fill their

time he would find himself funny. Alejandro would get a bark of laughter from his actions, he was sure. Rudy would at least pity him.

He wished they were here now, to provide the wealth of knowledge they surely had. John was listless, squandering for any sort of idea about how to navigate this wretched curse. If anything, it would be nice to have their friendship, even despite the teasing he was sure to get if they ever found out. If being an absolute - John wasn't known for keeping his mouth shut for long.

He sighs into the cabin because he was alone again, Ghost off doing whatever Ghost did in the late morning. John scratches at the fresh bandages that they had changed the night before, John not needing the help but having feigned that he did. Ghost had given into him, and the bandages were all that was left of his touch, John waking to find the bed empty again.

There hadn't been a night where John had awakened to feel Ghost's body curled against him again, and despite sleeping well he wished he had. It was a secret he had managed to keep to himself, one he desperately wished to relive, if only to once again feel his body against his own.

Attraction was the worst kind of exhaustion.

What was worse yet, he still hadn't been able to properly ask Ghost if he could tag along on his daily journeys. He was without proper pants and pelt, but he figured he would brave the air if only to get a glimpse of where Ghost went. To catalog the places he could find him, to know just where he has gone before. Slowly, and yet with a haste that lit a fire under his skin, he wanted to solve the mystery of Ghost - but only if Ghost would let him.

There was also the fact that now that John was moving well enough, he wanted to be useful. To displace his burden upon Ghost. There was no telling how long the man would keep him, but John wondered if maybe he could do more, be more, it would disguise the fact that he was long overdue for his leave. If he could be more of an asset, maybe Ghost wouldn't mind keeping him around a little longer - at least until spring.

By then John would have to leave, although he knew leaving him would be difficult.

His eyes wander over to his bow, set by the doorway all this time. John wasn't the best hunter in his village, and he had plenty to learn,

but if they could fix his bow he'd have his reason to follow Ghost, he thinks. He bites his lip as he takes in the fractured weapon - unsure if they had the means to fix her. He gets up from the bed, letting the furs fall away as he ambles over to it, picking up each halve and inspecting where it split.

If he could smooth the splinter, maybe they could glue it back together. How it had even cracked was gone from his memory, but he hoped it was still salvageable. He gathers his knife, flopping before the fire and setting about the task of cutting away the bits he thought were irreplaceable.

He busied himself, inspecting the bow over and over until Ghost makes his return, the door opening without much preamble. John jolts where he sits, so engrossed in his task that had missed the crunch of snow outside, and turns to gaze up at him with a short smile.

"Need'ta stop doing that to me," He says, placing the bow down and turning his back on the fire.

"Get better hearing," Ghost mumbles back, kicking the door closed behind him.

"Stop being so damn silent," John rolls his eyes, but catches the way Ghost peers around him to the bow that he had settled on the floor.

Taking his gaze for a question, he pulls the bow around until it's sat between them, working on unthreading the string as he answers. "Think there is any way to save her?"

He thinks he's done a fine job of fixing it up for repair, and he looks up as Ghost comes to inspect it, taking one of the halves from his hands as he looks it over.

Ghost shakes his head after a moment, voice low. "I don't have the tools for this."

He hands the splintered bow back to John, and he takes it back with the sour note of loss. He cradles the handle in his lap, and Ghost must see the look on his face because after he turns away to hang his cloak, he offers a trade.

"We can maybe carve a new one. It won't replace what you've lost but," He trails off, looking over his shoulder at John now that the offer was in the air.

"I - yes," John accepts, far too hastily to be quite as opaque as he'd like. He can tell by the way the cloth around Ghost's brow seems to tug into a raise from beneath the mask. "What I mean to say is, if ye don't mind of course."

Ghost huffs, turning away to fix their daily meal. "Wouldn't offer it if I minded."

John smiles as he stands, abandoning his earlier work in order to help Ghost with dinner.

"Right."

-

The next day, Ghost comes back with a branch made of yew.

John takes over for dinner, keeping an eye as Ghost hacks away with a small hatchet, carving out the rough shape of the bow. He's quiet as he works, and John sets the pot over the stove for the meat to cook, settling down on the rug to watch him.

His hands are a deft thing as he works, taking the time and care to shape the branch into some semblance of a bow. John is enamored as he looks on, that Ghost had taken it upon himself to replace the weapon, although when he had originally offered John had accepted in hopes of Ghost's hands guiding his. But somehow, this was better - That Ghost cared enough to craft for him.

It wasn't even yet his, but he cherished it.

He's struck by how much Ghost knows, although he had once said what he learned was bred out of necessity. The multiple talents of him, not quite a mystery but still something unfathomable. John watches in a daze as he thinks about him.

By the time the bow is properly shaped, the meal is done, and Ghost sets the long wooden structure off to the side as he accepts a bowl from John, their fingers brushing as it's passed along. He doesn't quite jerk at the touch, although John can feel the slight jolt that runs through his fingers, but he counts it as a win either way.

They eat in silence for the most part, nothing but the trade of scraped utensils between them. John is content to be sat beside him despite his back to him again, his fingers still abuzz where they had touched, and he smiles into his bowl to hide the flutter in his chest.

It's enough to make him snort at his antics.

Ghost peers over his shoulder at him. "Alright?" He asks.

"Just thinkin'," John hums, slurping into his spoon.

"Doin' that an awful lot these days," Ghost retorts, turning back to his own meal.

"Awful lot to think about," John quips back, before cursing himself for opening the topic.

Ghost is quiet, eating, before he speaks up again. "Like what?"

John fumbles as he searches for an answer that doesn't wind down to simply 'You' again, even though it was the truth. "Where'd you learn to make a bow?"

Ghost is quiet for a long time, so long that John wonders if he had maybe forgotten to say the thought out loud. He sets the dirty bowl off to the side, tilting his head in Ghost's direction.

"Ghost?"

Ghost sets his own bowl to the side, and John notes how the bowl is not quite finished. Something seems wrong, in the way the lines of his shoulders tense at the question, but John doesn't know why.

"A friend taught me, once. His father was a bowyer." Ghost finally supplies, pulling his mask down before turning to John, hand out. It takes John a moment to figure out what it is he's reaching for, before he realizes it was for John's own bowl.

"Don't worry about it, I got it," John says, standing and collecting Ghost's bowl before he has a say in the matter. He scoops up the pot before setting everything on the table, stepping into his boots. He cracks the door and lets in a flurry of snowflakes, sending a chill up his arms and across his chest. The wind was a little bit fierce tonight, and as he closed it again he considered doubling back for the cloak in the dresser when something settles over his shoulders.

It takes a moment for him to recognize the cloth, the deep smell of musk and pine enveloping him in a soothing hold. He stands root still as Ghost wraps *his* cloak around him. He hadn't even heard him get up.

“It’s cold tonight, be careful,” Ghost’s voice is low in his ear, and John feels a shudder tremble down his spine.

“Will do,” He croaks, fastening the strings quickly and unsticking the door again, gathering up the bundle of dishes hastily and making an exit lest Ghost see the flush of his cheeks.

As always, Ghost waits for him in the doorway, as if to watch in case some other beast were to find him for a second time. John burrows as deep into the cloak as he can as he works, the smell wrapping around him just as tightly as where the cloth was fastened. He takes his time, probably longer than he should, but eventually he stands from the ground and makes his journey over to the door. John looks up when Ghost doesn’t move himself from the doorway, simply holding out his hands for the bundle.

John hands it over, confused, and when Ghost finally steps aside only then does John follow to the warmth inside.

Ghost sets the bowls on the table, inspecting them over before he turns back to John. He accepts the cloak that John hands out to him and sets it to the rafters. “Good job,” he mutters over his shoulder.

John feels his cheeks ignite again at the praise. “Can’t have you doin’ all the work,” He ducks his head, running a hand over the back of his neck sheepishly.

Gentle fingers run through the top of his scalp, nails digging in ever so slightly as they ruffle his hair. John flicks his gaze to meet Ghost’s, eyes wide as Ghost drops his hand.

“Told you to stop worryin’ so much about me,” He rumbles.

John knows his face is as hot as the flames that dance in his peripheral, and he ducks his head again to hide it. “Don’t give me anything to worry about, then.”

Ghost huffs something of a laugh, ruffling John’s hair again before he makes off towards the fire.

When John doesn’t move from where he stands, he glances over his shoulder. He waves his hand in ‘come on then’ manner, and John is helpless but to follow. He gently sits beside him as Ghost takes up the bow again, and he gazes over at John with a glint in his eye.

“Want to learn how to carve a bow?” He asks.

John smiles, almost like a secret, before he's following Ghost's lead and leaning his head on his palm.

"Show me."

-

The crafting of the bow was a more intricate task than what John was aware of, the process long and time consuming, but Ghost weathers it all the while, slowly guiding John through his work as he goes. It's an all consuming task as he strips the remaining bark, and uses the knife to carefully shape the bow into something symmetrical. He talks John through the process of sanding the wood smooth, and he follows along by taking his own handful of bulrush over his tiny lion.

It isn't until a few nights and days have passed that the bow is complete, and as John finishes tying off the string and giving it a perfunctory tug, he smiles, delighted.

"Not bad," He grins over at Ghost.

"It will need to be properly oiled, but it should do the trick for now." Ghost nods with a smile in his voice, and John dearly wishes he could see it.

"Think we could take her out for a test run?" John asks, positioning the bow as if to take a shot. He draws the string and mimes aiming down sight, letting the string twang as he makes the 'kill'.

"You're like a kid with a new toy," Ghost says, sounding almost fond on John's ears and John can't help the bubble of laughter that stutters out of his chest.

"Have to see how good your work is, don't I?"

Ghost rolls his eyes but tilts his head to the side, eyes dropping down to where the bandages were hidden by John's borrowed tunic. "Will you be well enough for that?"

John feigns a pout as he sets the bow to the ground. "I'll be careful," He promises.

Ghost huffs a breath, but shakes his head. "Don't come crying to me if you hurt yourself."

John smiles with his own roll of his eyes, setting his hand backwards

in search of his own lopsided creation before he grabs at it. He rolls it over in his palm for a moment, just a tiny bit unsure, before he presents the whittled lion to Ghost.

Ghost looks down at it before giving John a curious look, gently plucking the sculpture from John's hand.

"For you," John says, running a hand through his hair before settling it on his neck, embarrassed. "I know it's not very good, but consider it thanks for everything."

Ghost is silent for a long time, running the lion between his hands before he looks up at John. If John only knew what he was thinking behind those eyes of his, maybe he could decipher the look in them.

"Thank you," Comes Ghost's reply, and John is softened by how honest the words sound - as if John's horrible little lion was something precious.

"Any time."

-

The morning air is almost liberating as he follows Ghost into the forest, crunching his way into the snow with his quiver and new bow strapped to his back. He had awoken with Ghost's hand on his shoulder, warmth blooming through his gut as he took in Ghost in the morning light. Sunlight dancing off his blonde lashes and cascading into the dark of his eyes, painting them the color of fresh earth. He was almost in disbelief that Ghost would allow him to follow, but he had made right of the offer, slipping into the too large pants and cloak that Ghost had set out for him.

Thankfully his belt, although dark with bloodstains, had been salvageable, although the extra inches the pants had on him tripped him up until he could tuck them into his boots. Thankfully Ghost hadn't commented on that.

A light squall peppered the air, frost catching on his breath. Although he could not feel the sunlight on his face, otherwise blocked by gray clouds, he smiled towards the sky - grateful to ease the bout of cabin fever that had slowly been encroaching on him.

They don't walk side by side, John allowing Ghost to take the lead as he walks them through checking the different traps that outlined the cabin in a haphazard circle. They come up clear, but John doesn't

mind, happy to tag along only so long as Ghost keeps him.

They spend most of their day in silence, no small talk to be made while on the hunt. John finds it comforting just to be in his presence - to take in the light of him in day, to watch as he crouches low to observe tracks. To catalog his movements, the sight of him dazzling. John is so far gone in watching him that he doesn't hear the sound until he runs into Ghost's fist.

Ghost makes a hushing sound, jerking his head in the direction somewhere to their left. They creep forward until they are both peering amongst the trees. A ptarmigan plucks at a bush, searching for food of its own as its white coat nearly hides it from view. Ghost gives him a look, and that's all John needs before he's setting up his bow, arrow in the nock.

He looks down sight, breathes, before he sends the arrow flying.

The bird squawks as he doesn't quite make the killing shot. It flaps around helplessly as Ghost makes his move in, putting it out of its misery.

Ghost holds it up, inspecting it as a stream of broken sunlight catches him in its light golden hue. He looks to John. "How's my work then?"

John smiles.

"Beautiful," He says. He isn't talking about the bow.

-

Dinner tastes better when he's the one who caught it, John decides as he spoons the last hunk of meat into his mouth.

Ghost insists on doing the dishes, and John lets him, standing in the doorway on watch. They trade off the bundle at the door, John setting the dishes back on the table as Ghost moves on to tend the fire. They settle into their comfortable silence, John laying with his back to the rug as Ghost sharpens his knife, and then John's when he offers.

"A man of so many talents," He jokes as he hands the knife over, watching his practiced movements as sleep half-lids his eyes.

Ghost must see the sleep on him, because he huffs. "If you're tired, go to bed."

“M content right here,” John stretches before setting his arms behind his head. Truthfully, he was rather tired, the earlier trek taking something out of him, but he would rather spend the time with Ghost.

“I’m not putting you in bed if you fall asleep like that,” Ghost humors him, and John smiles lazily as he shuts his eyes.

“Then entertain me so I don’t fall asleep,” He yawns.

He feels a foot press into his thigh, and he laughs something private as he swats it away. “Okay, okay,” he groans, sitting up and running a hand across his eyes before prying them open again.

He crawls into a bed, sated from the meal and burrowing into his corner. Sleepily he sends Ghost a searching look. “Ye comin’?”

The answering scrape of the knife comes as Ghost doesn’t move. “In a bit,” He motions with the knife.

John answers with a hum, closing his eyes to the beckon of darkness that awaits him. He falls asleep to the soft sounds of a sharpening blade.

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Something was wrong.

The cabin is dark again, not even the moonlight to guide John’s searching eyes as he tries to find the source of what had awakened him.

He feels it before he even hears it, the sound of gasping breath following the twitch of the body next to his. He rolls his head to the side, Ghost turned away from him but John pressed close enough to feel the shudder that runs along him. Another gasp, louder than the last, and John moves to sit up, watching as the man shakes.

A nightmare.

John bites his lip, unsure even as he runs a gentle hand down Ghost’s shoulder, giving his bicep a firm squeeze.

“Ghost?”

He’s answered with a groan as Ghost flinches from the touch, but it only pours resolve into his gut as he grasps him firmer, giving him a cautionary shake before rolling him towards him. “Ghost?” He

questions again, louder now.

Ghost gasps a final time, eyes shooting wide as he at first grasps for John's hand on him before it flies to his face, seemingly searching for the mask that he always kept in place.

John reaches across him, grabbing the wooden creation and handing it over for Ghost's searching hand. Only when Ghost has a hold on it does he seem to calm, placing the mask on his chest as he sucks in slowed, rasping breaths.

"It's okay," John whispers, knowing not what to make of his hand as it hovers like a fly above Ghost, unsure of where to land. He settles it slowly, cautiously across Ghost's bicep again, hoping the action is more grounding than not. He runs his thumb soothingly across the expanse of skin when Ghost doesn't pull away, and they lock eyes once before Ghost flicks his away again.

"What frightens you so badly?" John asks, voice low as he follows a line of scar. Ghost swallows as he shakes his head, unable to unstick his tongue from where it had become rooted.

"It's okay, yeah? You're here now?" It's more of a question of whether or not Ghost was present or whether he was still lost to the dreams. Ghost answers by placing his hand over John's, giving it a rough squeeze in answer before falling limp again.

"Do you want to talk about it?" John asks, and Ghost shakes his head 'no', eyes pointedly towards the ceiling as he resolutely doesn't look at John.

John continues to run his thumb until Ghost hand settles back over his, a quiet plea to stop.

His gaze must burn a hole into Ghost's resolve, because slowly he takes up John's fingers, guiding them until they rest across his belly. John is confused by the action, almost enough to say something, when the hand presses his firmly against his abdomen, and John gets a feel for what he was saying.

Slowly, he carts his fingers over a line of scar tissue, until he finds another that intersects and follows it all the way down. Another, and then another, and soft sort of understanding overtakes John almost as swiftly as the anger does.

"These are lash marks," John breathes, and Ghost doesn't confirm or

deny him of an answer. Slowly he brings his hand to cup his cheek. "Is this why you hide your face?" It's an awful question, one John hopes he's wrong about.

Ghost doesn't answer him, following his hand up before he's unhooking a bit of cloth to loosen the bundle of his face. John doesn't pry it away, know's the act would be a breach of trust somehow as he gently slips his hands under the cloth. He runs his fingers across his cheek, following a line of scar tissue down across his jaw, and then another that runs across his mouth, over plush lips that John would rather not think about right now. Another line across the bridge of his nose and John can't help but rest his hand against the marred skin, cupping it again softly.

"Oh Ghost," He whispers.

"I don't need your pity," Ghost grunts, and the touch seems to be too much as he pulls his face away. John lets his hand slip down to the hollow of his throat, before he reaches slowly for the piece that Ghost had unhooked. Ghost tenses, but John just slowly tucks it back into place.

"Ye don't," John agree's, even though they both know he had it.

John settles next to him, hand sliding until it's rested over Ghosts' invitation. It's one that Ghost doesn't take, but he allows the touch all the same.

"Go back to sleep, Johnny," He rumbles, eyes straight ahead into the dead of night.

John hums, fighting against his fatigue even as he silences a yawn. "What about you?"

"Don't worry about me," He answers, and John only believes in him because Ghost wants him to.

-

The next morning, John isn't surprised to see Ghost has left without him.

The night is vivid in his mind, the feel of Ghost a wretched fire against his skin as he remembers his touch. Despite the horrid circumstance, John is guilty as he revels in the trust Ghost has chosen to give him, the act so much deeper than John could even fathom. He couldn't be

angry if Ghost needed the space now that he had confided in him something like that, and he knows well enough by now that he would return within his own pace.

He settles for sticking to the cabin even as night falls still without Ghost's return. He doesn't let worry set in, choosing instead to believe in Ghost.

Sure enough the man comes back, John finding his faith well placed. His greeting falls on deaf ears, and John finds he doesn't mind - getting to know Ghost was a slow thing, but he knew well enough to back off where he wasn't wanted.

He stays perched by the fire, allowing Ghost his space as he hacks away at his latest hunt, aggression in his motions where it is usually not. John winces at a particularly awful sound as he cleaves through marrow, the bone making a splintering sound.

"We're okay, yeah?" He asks, because he's slowly beginning to feel like he overstepped a boundary, even though it had been offered.

The movements stop, Ghost still as the question hangs in the air, tense in a way John hadn't seen him in a while. Finally, after a long moment, his shoulders seem to sag.

"It's fine," He answers, before beginning his chore again.

John doesn't bother him again, making room for him on the rug when he walks heavy footed over to the hearth, slinging the pot on the rod and with nowhere else to go, sitting down on the floor next to him.

They don't talk about it, mostly because John knows Ghost doesn't want to entertain the situation any more than he already has. When time comes for the pot to be pulled from the fire, John gets up to grab the bowls, offering one to Ghost that he readily spoons the stew into.

John is ready for their usual trade off, but stops when Ghost sets the mask to the floor and pulls the cloth up to just under his nose.

He knows he shouldn't stare, but can't quite help it as he takes in the expanse of skin more hungrily than any bowl could sate. He traces the lines and while in the pit of his stomach he mourns for him, he can't help finding the whole of him still as attractive as he knew him to be.

"Eat your food," Ghost grunts, as though he hadn't been the one to stray from their normal; As if he could blame John for taking in the

cut of his jaw and the ample curve of his lips.

He says nothing as he forces his head down, but he knows a smile is playing at his mouth, too wide to hide.

“Thank you,” Is all he says, and he can only hope Ghost knows what he means.

Chapter End Notes

Hey so just so you all know if you've left a kudo or a comment - I would die for you???? So thank you so much again <3 I'm blown away by all the kind words everyone has said!

Also I don't know how long it takes to make a bow. I know it is probably longer than an obscure amount of days, but for the sake of my boy running out of time Ghost is just that good. ㄝ(ツ)ㄝ

But now we're pickin' up the pace a bit here <3 I really don't know how long this is gonna end up being - I have an outline but its by scene not chapter lmao.

Anyway as always thank you so much for reading! I love you all <3

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's on one of the days Ghost returns early from his hunt that John finally asks about the growing pile of laundry. Ghost procures for him a wider basin and washboard from the shack outside, and John slowly draws the water to fill it, taking several trips to and from the well.

John scrubs the clothes and old bandages clean, and Ghost hangs them to dry from the rafters. They don't speak, working in ease of each other as if the two had done this a thousand times before. It strikes John as endlessly domestic, and brings a feeling of 'home' as he works.

What it would be like to call this place home.

John knows he's a man on borrowed time, knows that any day now Ghost could tire of him and send him on his way back down to the village. They both have to know, even as Ghost humors him and allows him to stay while the wounds slowly twist themselves into puckered scars. Yet to John, for all his earlier haste, he found a sense of contentment that he hadn't felt even in his *own* home.

He knew it was just his attraction talking. That the feeling of home was his want to be something they were not, made up of the flutter of his heart every time dark eyes settled on him. He'd like to think that after that night, the night Ghost allowed him a peek inside of something wholly turbulent and frightening, that they had gotten closer. Yet Ghost didn't speak of it, and neither did John. It was a stalemate either way, Ghost with no interest in reliving the conversation and John too scared to send him away.

And yet it was all John could think about. The touch of him, the bleeding openness that came so few and far between. He wanted to know Ghost, crawl inside of him a burrow there. The thought pulled at John so viscerally, and yet he was too scared to breach the walls that surrounded Ghost. It was so unlike him, to be so aware of the words to come out of his mouth before he spoke them, but Ghost was a fragile thing, as were they, and he didn't want to break it. Ghost had placed a trust in him that John knew didn't come easily, and it was hard to have that kind of trust and handle it as delicately as it needed

to be.

John traced the scars in his mind, wondered the story behind them. He knew it wasn't his place to ask, Ghost would give up that right in his own time, maybe, but it did nothing to stop his mind from running away with the worst of it. Ghost didn't need his pity, the scars surely aged longer than John could tell, and yet John wanted to give it so willingly. To run his hands again over the open scars and seal them away again all on his own so that maybe Ghost could finally heal.

John scared himself sometimes. The want that pulled in his belly at the mere thought of Ghost. His attraction, what had been a subtle thing was blossoming into something that John knew would sting, and yet he was helpless to stop it.

-

As John finishes the last bout of bandages and Ghost hangs them, he takes a look at the tunic he still wore and figured it properly soiled after the countless days he had worn it. There was no point in waiting for later, and he tugs it over his shoulders, throwing it into the water with a flop before water engulfs the cloth.

"Alright, you too then," He motions to where Ghost had sat himself, perched on the floor beside him and Ghost gives him a withering look.

"No," He answers, deadpan.

"I already know about them," John huffs, unhooking the bandages around his waist as he goes. It would do good to air out the newly formed scars, and if they were doing laundry, they were going to do it right. Even if he himself was refusing to strip down into the nude, both of them needed something clean to wear. "Besides, I'm in no better state."

Ghost rolls his eyes, looking away before he's pulling his own tunic over his head with a mumbled curse and tossing it in with John's. "Happy?" He grumbles, crossing his thick arms over his chest as though to preserve a sense of modesty.

In the light of day John can see just how the scars, puckered and poorly healed stretch across his body, wrapping around him in crossing, harsh lines. He tries not to dwell on them, knows his gaze unsettles something in Ghost the longer he stares, but it's a chore to drag his eyes away even though he does it. He clears his throat and pretends even to himself that the cut of Ghost doesn't do something to

John under his skin. The broad chest, the toned and muscled stomach. It leaves his mouth dry.

“Happy enough to not have to smell ye,” He lies, resuming his earlier task of scrubbing the cloth against the washboard. He starts with Ghost’s even as the man gets up to go find something new to wear with a huff, if only so it could dry for him sooner.

John scrubs diligently as Ghost comes back around to watch him. He finishes soon enough before standing to help Ghost hang the last of it, satisfied with his work even if the cabin is now a hazard from the drippage.

He jumps when Ghost comes to stand in front of him, Ghost’s eyes low as he inspects the newly formed scars that adorn John’s torso. John doesn’t know what to make of the look in his eyes as his hand reaches out, slowly running his fingertips across the expanse of marred skin. John feels his stomach jump at the touch, a whirl of somersaults beneath as Ghost steps in closer.

“Ghost?” He breathes, thrown by the sudden change in temperature of the room, the heat that swelters across his chest.

“They look good, all things considered,” Ghost rumbles, voice deep with his hand still pressed to the softness of John’s belly as he inspects the damage.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore, not really,” John supplies, voice just as low. He presses in against the touch, an invitation for Ghost to do whatever he pleased. Ghost presses against his abdomen slowly, fingertips tracing over each bump, his callous’ catching on where scab had yet to clear. It’s achingly slow, Ghost’s exploration of him, and finally when the hand dips too low it traces up again, much the same as John’s had nights ago. John barely breathes, scared that even the rise of his chest would send Ghost away again.

Finally, Ghost seems to come back from whatever daze he had fallen into.

Ghost doesn’t say anything as he retracts his hand, blinking and clearing his throat. He turns away towards the table where their dinner had yet to be prepared and John is left cold in the aftermath; His mind is a whirlwind where his body is not, his heart aflutter with nonsense as he remains stark still.

The touch had breached well past the sense of casual touch Ghost had

always given him before, and he fumbles for rhyme or reason to the action. It had felt, somehow, more - and yet John didn't dare breathe an ounce of hope into his lungs.

John follows him after a moment of waiting, closing his eyes against the quick beat of his heart.

They work in tandem, bumping shoulders every so often as Ghost quarters the hare and John cuts through herb. They talk nothing about what had just transpired, although John desperately wished they could. About just what went on in his head during those rare moments when Ghost would reach for him, and John could do nothing but let himself melt against the touch, helpless.

Yet he doesn't speak of it, despite the vice grip it holds on his thoughts. Dutifully he scoops the herb into the pot, and Ghost does the same with the meat before he's hoisting towards the fire, weaving through hanging cloth as he goes.

While the meal cooks, John sits listless, his body a bundle of nerves with nothing to do about it. He knew what he wanted, Ghost's hands on him again with a craving that outdid anything a meal could sate. Knew well enough that the moment had passed and was gone and cursed the hand of the clock for moving so swiftly before he could get his bearings.

A thought strikes him, one he thinks could probably get him gutted the same as the hare had been, but he'd never been known much for his good ideas.

As casually as he can muster, he leans until his head lands squarely in Ghost's lap, stretching his legs out towards the fire and even putting on a show of humming as though he were content, besides the rapid beat of his heart that swelled almost painfully in his chest.

Ghost tenses, the whole of it throughout his body as he raises his hands, as though unsure of just what to do with a lap full of John now that he had him.

"What are you doing?" Ghost rumbles, dark eyes indecipherable as they gaze down at John. John lights up with his most lopsided grin, pleased at not having been shoved off right away, although he couldn't be sure it wasn't in his future.

"I'm bored, entertain me," He yawns, lolling his head to rest against one of Ghost's knees, peering up at him with his best pleading eyes.

Ghost huffs something of a laugh, sounding almost as though in disbelief, before a hand falls hesitantly into his hair, stroking through in a way that sends a pleasant tingle down John's spine. "And how do you expect me to do that?" Comes his light answer, as though a smile were hidden where John couldn't see.

"This is fine," John hums, stretching out further. He closes his eyes to the soft card of Ghost's fingers through his hair, nails occasionally catching to scratch against his scalp. His hair is longer now, longer than it had been in years, but he finds he doesn't mind too much as long as Ghost keeps threading his fingers through it.

"Don't you dare fall asleep," Ghost remarks dryly, and John laughs despite himself.

"And if I do?" He teases.

"I'll toss you into the fire," Ghost grumbles. John can feel the rumble of it through his legs where he is cushioned.

John knows he doesn't really mean it as he smiles up in his direction, laughing again. "After all that work to put me together again?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps ye should reconsider being so comfortable," John remarks blandly, even while a smile still twists at his lips.

He peers through half-lidded eyes just enough to catch the roll of Ghost's own, his head tilting skyward as if asking with a prayer. John chuckles before closing his eyes again, before he could be caught staring.

Ghost grumbles some more, and yet strangely he doesn't push John away. Not yet, anyway, as the stew begins to bubble in the pot.

John knows he is likely to get shoved off in a few moments, but for now he was content with Ghost's hand in his hair.

-

John does not know what pulls the tide and flow of what allows him to accompany Ghost on his hunts, but he doesn't question it when he awakens to a hand on his shoulder. It's a rare occasion, but it is always one that John dutifully accepts, strapping the bow and quiver to his back and following out into the early mornings.

It's one such morning, John basking in the warmth of the sun as he follows Ghost deep into the forest. They usually never talk much on their hunts, but John is in a particularly chatty mood as they follow the different tracks that litter the ground, the fine weather pulling him in and loosening his tongue.

Ghost does little to humor him, but sometimes he will grunt in acknowledgement or give a short quip of his own, ever focused on the task at hand even while John gives his best attempt at distracting him. He talks about anything he can, from the weather to the melting snow. He mentions the village a handful of times, stories about Rudy, Alejandro, Gaz and Price. Small trivial things Ghost would otherwise never know about him unless he spoke it outloud.

He knows he is creating an awful lot of racket, and yet Ghost doesn't tell him off to be quiet. He shushes him where he thinks he's found something, but other than that he listens to John as he prattles away.

Today should have been easy, what with them finally finding a fowl as dusk seemed to set in, and yet fate had it out for them it would seem as the call of a wolf settles into the air, far too close and far too loud to be any good for them.

"Get a move on, then," Ghost nods to him, and John gives his own answering nod before the two of them make haste back towards the cabin. An answering howl at their backs, and John speeds up to keep up with Ghost's long strides, thankful the snow is shallow and he doesn't have it pulling at his feet.

They had hiked deep into the forest today, and John wanted to curse them for being reckless even though they had made the trek before. There were still beasts that lurked out here, and how was he one to forget with the scars that adorned him?

"Pick up the pace, Johnny," Ghost huffs as the wolf calls echo around them, and John wants to bite back that he's right behind him before his foot slips on a shallow piece of ice, sending him to stumble into Ghost's back.

"Watch your step," Ghost grunts as he turns to right him, steadying John before his eyes shoot up to glance behind them.

"Outta time."

John shoots a look behind him and finds just what he was looking at, a small pack of wolves crashing through the bramble, snapping their

jaws and barking them down. There were only three, that much John can be thankful for, although that still left them outnumbered, and there was no telling if the pack had been split. They looked young, and maybe that was why they were so brash.

“Go on Johnny, get out of here,” Ghost moves to slowly stand in front of him, and John catches his wrist before he can fully shield him.

“I’m not leaving,” He scoffs in disbelief, the thought of it appalling. There was no way he would leave Ghost to fend off the three of them alone. Worry sets in as the wolves spread out, dark eyes full of malicious intent as they hunch towards the ground, ready any moment to strike.

“I’ll distract them, you go back to the cabin,” He orders, knife unsheathed and held before him in a sure grip as he shrugs John off of him. He steps away from him as though he expected John to listen to him. As if John weren’t one to unmatch his stubborn direction.

“Bollocks,” John curses under his breath, watching as Ghost cuts an intimidation tactic that he isn’t sure would work against the wolves as much as it would work against a human. They growl as he moves in closer, a human shield between them and John.

He doesn’t have to think twice as he draws an arrow, aiming down sight to the one on Ghost’s right. There was no way he was going anywhere without Ghost right behind him. He *needed* Ghost behind him.

Before anything can make a move, John releases the arrow, landing just shy of the eye socket. The head of the arrow lands deep, enough to have surely pierced the skull as the wolf falls over, unmoving save for the final twitch of its body. He gives out a cry of victory, but not so loud that he can’t hear Ghost reprimanding him.

“I told you to go!”

“No!”

Something about their talking must set off the wolf on the left, because it lunges towards Ghost, snapping and frothing even after Ghost’s knife finds its way into its throat. He’s too engrossed in the one to properly fight the other, and John isn’t fast enough with his arrow to stop the middle one from sinking its fangs into Ghost’s forearm.

Ghost throws off the dying wolf to push his forearm to the back of its mouth, fingers prying at the jaw for release as he grunts with the effort and with pain. John can't properly take a shot with the two of them so close, and he drops his bow in favor of unsheathing his own knife, rushing to sink the blade into the wolves side.

It yelps as it finally lets go of Ghost from its bite, whining as it scampers away with a final dreadful look, leaving the other two to rot.

Ghost's breath is jagged as he inspects the bite marks, and then John, blood dripping down to the frozen earth and painting it red.

"I told you to go," He huffs, watching as John slices through the bottom of his cloak before moving in to tie it against the bleeding wound, tight.

"And leave you to have all the fun?" John grunts, inspecting his handiwork before he's looking up at Ghost with narrowed eyes.

"I had it handled, I've done this before," Ghost answers, twisting his arm to get his own good look.

"Good for you," John bites back, plucking the fowl and his bow from the ground before grabbing at Ghost's hand and dragging him back in the direction of the cabin, Ghost stumbling after him for a moment before his steps find more leveled ground.

They don't say anything as night falls between them, John dragging Ghost by the hand as he leads them quickly through the trees. His mind is a flurry of anger and indignation. One, that Ghost would find him so incapable, and two that he should put himself before him, rendering him now injured because he had felt the need to step between them.

He was *worried*. Despite how shallow most of the wound had been, it did nothing to quell him. Despite Ghost's protests he could have been severely injured, and the image of him shredded without help comes unbidden to John's mind, and he stomps down on it with venom. Ghost had been reckless, and he wanted them to both know it.

When they finally find their way back to the cabin, John settles Ghost at the hearth of the fire and points a threatening finger. "Don't move."

Ghost rolls his eyes with a flutter but stays where he's seated, unwrapping the wound while John makes noise at the table, grabbing the herbs he needed for a salve.

"I had it handled," Ghost says again from over John's shoulder, and John slams the pestle into the mortar in response.

"I'm sure you did," He grits back, pouring all his frustration into grinding the herbs into a paste. There were so many things that could go wrong with an animal bite. Rabies, infection. One slip up and Ghost could very well have been torn to pieces. All because he was too worried about protecting John.

So perhaps John *was* a little angry. He thought Ghost should know him a little better than that.

When the salve is made and no other words are exchanged, Ghost silent where he sits, John draws water from the well and picks up a handful of clean bandages and a washcloth, making his way over to where he sits waiting.

Thankfully, the blood had clotted and the bleeding had stopped, John thinks as he sets through the task of taking Ghost's arm in his hands and cleaning out the cuts. He washes away the old blood, taking a deeper look at the flesh, swollen and puffy.

"I can do it myself," Ghost hisses as John digs into the bitemarks to rid it of any potential for infection, meticulously cleaning the wound even as Ghost tries to jerk away.

"Good for you. Now hold still," John chides him, pulling his arm back into his lap and holding him down.

Eventually Ghost relents with a deep sigh, and as John applies the salve and wraps the arm around with bandage, tucking the cloth in, John gives him a hard look.

"You're lucky it didn't break the bone," He says softly, the earlier anger draining away now that his worry had been somewhat mended. "You don't have to do things alone."

Ghost lifts his gaze from where it had been fixated on his now bandaged arm, deep eyes staring John down with another one of his indecipherable looks. Like he didn't know what to make of the man sitting beside him, as though John hadn't taken up nearly a month of his time, didn't sleep in the same bed as him, or shared every meal.

There must be a look on John's face, because his eyes widen just a sliver.

"I've told you. You don't have to worry about me," Ghost says, voice low and almost soft as if an understanding had taken him.

"Then stop giving me things to worry about." John looks away, back towards the fire with a purse of his lips. A new log would be needed to feed it soon, he notes.

"Johnny," Ghost calls, a feather light touch falling to his wrist where Ghost's thumb runs across the back of his hand. John looks to him warily, even if his heart thuds traitorously in his chest at the touch. "I'm -" He cuts off as flicks his gaze down, almost guiltily as he pulls away. "Sorry. You did good back there. You made the right call."

He struggles with the words as though they were particularly hard to say, the apology coming out stilted.

The words feed into John's chest, a soothing hand to the crevice that had cracked under his worry. For a moment, there had been a possibility that he could have lost him and it strikes him like a backhand across the face how lucky they were. How lucky he was, that even though he knew one day he would have to leave Ghost, he wouldn't lose him. Not like that.

In that moment, John knew he would carry Ghost with him much farther than his feet could ever carry him. Knew it so profoundly; That his attraction wasn't just a passing thing that would leave him in a few weeks or months.

He was...

Oh.

He was falling.

-

John awakes to birdsong. A quiet twitter that fills the cabin from just outside the window, the morning early and still dark. The sun not quite yet in the sky.

Ghost is a heavy weight beneath him, John's head snug in the crook of his neck, soft snores vibrating through his chest as he sleeps. John opens his eyes blurrily to spot his hand just above his heart, the steady beat its own song beneath his fingers. It was the second time John had beat Ghost to waking, and he settled into the warmth of the other man, endlessly grateful.

He wondered if he always missed these moments, while he slept on and Ghost rose for the day, or if he was just lucky enough to have experienced it twice now. Like a small secret all of his own, the experience of waking up next to Ghost a taunt of what he could have. He wonders what it would be like to wake up like this every day. To have this every day. To awaken curled in Ghost's arms or to have Ghost wrapped around him. To have the other man as his and to be had.

Slowly he strokes his fingers over the muscled chest, thumb tracing the peek of collarbone above the shirt.

Maybe he could, if he wasn't such a coward.

What he would give, to tell Ghost about his feelings, his *want*. To have them be received. To have every morning to come after this one, if only for as long as Ghost would keep him. To know his name and to sigh it under his breath. To feel his mouth beneath his own.

John *wanted*, so fiercely he made himself nearly dizzy with it.

Ghost groans under him, and John stops his hand.

"Morning," Comes Ghost's groggy voice, rustling a bit as the sleep slips off of him.

John raises his head, locking eyes as Ghost raises a hand to rub away the night that still hung on to him. "Didn't know ye were awake."

"Only just," He grumbles, gently sitting up so John can roll off of him, reaching for his mask beside the bed and hooking it into place. "What are you doing awake so early?"

He makes to get out of the bed, but John isn't ready to give everything up just yet. Last night must still be clinging to him, because all he could ask for right now, all he wanted was a few more moments to lie with him.

In the early morning with the world still quiet and dreams hovering behind his eyelids, he was just brazen enough to take it.

He reaches up a hand to place it back over Ghost's chest, halting him.

"Stay?" He asks, pressing gently as if to push Ghost back down with him. For reasons John can't find an answer to, Ghost follows until his head is back on the pillow, eyes locked onto John's in question as he

goes.

“Why?” Ghost nearly whispers, doing nothing to stop him as John turns back into his side, resting his head back where it had been only moments ago. His eyes close with a flutter as he listens for Ghost’s heart, to listen that he was alive and here and that if only for the morning he was John’s. John would never ask for it again, if he could just have this one time.

“Just stay,” He answers softly, wrapping his arm around Ghost’s chest and swiping his thumb along his ribs in lazy movement

Ghost doesn’t answer him for a long while before he’s leaning into him, resting his head against the crown of John’s forehead. “Ok Johnny. I’ll stay.”

John lays reveling in the feel of him until slowly, without meaning to, he drifts off.

-

When he awakens again, it’s to Ghost’s hand in his hair, fingers gently carding through the strands. He sighs into the feel of it, pressing against the fingers in open invitation to continue.

“You with me, Johnny?” Ghost asks, voice low in his chest. It rumbles through John and he mumbles something indecipherable in response, nestling further into the warmth of him. He knows he’s being greedy, judging by the slot of the sun through the windows, and yet he lays steadfast - not willing to give up even one minute.

A chuckle shakes him, and he groggily opens his eyes to glare at the man looking down at him for the disturbance. Couldn’t he see that he wasn’t ready yet?

“Come on, off with ya.” Ghost pushes, and John rolls away for the second time this morning, forlorn.

“It’s too early,” He grumbles in objection, even as he stretches out under the covers, arms shaking above his head from the strain. He groans with the action before letting his breath out in one fell swoop, falling boneless back into the furs.

“I’d argue it’s late,” Ghost says, getting up with a stretch of his own. When he’s done he turns to peer down at where John lays, a hint of a smile in his eyes and a hand rested on his hip. “Have a good sleep?”

John grumbles as he has the decency to feel embarrassed about his earlier actions. He knows well enough by now that if Ghost hadn't wanted him there, he wouldn't have stayed.

But he had stayed. All because John had asked.

Something akin to warmth steadies itself in his chest.

He smiles despite his embarrassment, sitting up and scratching the back of his neck, pleased. "I did, actually."

"Good, now get up." Ghost nods, turning towards where his cloak was hung and pulling it across his shoulders, and John does.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is gonna be a little late :) but worry not I will not abandon this fic. The brain fog just gets to me sometimes.

I hope you all enjoy the chapter and thank you again for so many kind words. I love all of you :) ♥◻

Edit: Also forgot, but you can now find me on twitter at Minime_l_o

Come say hello if you like < 3 :)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hey remember a couple days ago when I said I was taking a break? I lied I guess.

Got drunk and wrote the whole chapter in one night.

Anyway peek the new tags and M to E warning :) Enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The days were bleeding in warmer now, John knew. The snow was melting, and slowly but surely the brown of the earth was peeking through in the more shallow spots. Spring would come any day now.

And John wasn't any closer to figuring out how to leave.

To put it simply, he was at a loss. He knew he had obligations, mourned for his friends in the village that were without knowledge of what had happened to him or where he was. He knew he couldn't have both, couldn't stay and leave at the same time. He wished he could send a post, somehow, or at the very least take Ghost with him. Not that he could ask the man to uproot his life for something as timid as what they had. Friendship, which he had felt was too formal in the beginning to lay claim to their dynamic, had slowly worked its way into something even more fragile.

John wasn't the smartest man, he knew. His tongue was as daft as they came, laying waste to whatever came to mind, but he wasn't *stupid*. Something had grown between him and Ghost, something he was careful to hold inside his chest lest he run too far with it. He could feel it in the small touches Ghost laid upon him, in his hair, across his hands when they brushed by accident. The way he let John lay upon his lap, or upon his chest in the mornings when neither were inclined to rise in the early light. He kept John around for a *reason*, he was sure, and it wasn't because John was particularly useful. John was an awful racket to his soft footfalls as they would trek upon the frozen earth in hunt for meal and forage. He didn't have any specific need for John, and so John could only deduce that he kept him around for his company.

Despite all of that, John still couldn't fathom him. He'd never met anyone quite like him before.

When he had first met Ghost, he could have never guessed he would fall for the man. His caring, the softness of him beneath every hard layer. The brown of his eyes, filled with so much emotion, ever a mystery but bleeding all the same. The deep grit of his voice, once absent but now all he could hear, a sound he would beg for, if the need had for it.

What was such a funny thing, that being gutted by a mountain lion had turned out to be one of the best things that had happened to him. All because it had brought him to Ghost.

Oh, what he would give to know his name. To taste the sweetness of it on his tongue; To speak it mind and soul. To let it be the breath of him. To pry open soft lips between his own and have the taste of him, if only to carry the memory of it. John would reckon he would give anything for it.

The touch of him was like a fire upon his skin wherever it may lay, a branding he would happily let lay claim to him if Ghost so wished for it. He was lost to the aching for him, on the days where Ghost went without him, if only for the grit of his voice, the chance for him to brush against his shoulder as they walked side by side.

He had never known he could care so deeply for another, and the thought was like a lightning strike that rattled inside his bones, electrifying. He knew only that which consumed his every thought, and that was that he was slowly allowing himself to fall much deeper for the other man than he could ever hope for. It was a chore to be away from him, and now that he had his touch it was all he could do to chase it. He was just a man, and yet he craved more than a desolate god in desperate need of prayer.

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"I need a pint," John proclaims lazily into the open air, settled at the foot of Ghost as the other man sharpens his knife meticulously.

It's a quiet evening, dinner done and the dishes sorted, bellies full and conversation otherwise run dry. He had been spending the night watching Ghost's hands, the way they worked in the softness of the firelight and the way they caressed the blade with each stroke. What was such a silly thing, to be jealous of a hunting knife; if only those hands would explore John in the same careful manner.

Ghost hums from above him, light glinting off the silver of the knife as he lays it to the side. "That so?"

“Aye,” he confirms. “Murder for it.”

It had been well over a month since he had laid a visit to the pub in the center of the village, and although he wasn't quite as desperate for the taste of amber on his tongue as he said he was, it was as good a night as any for a warm mead. He craved the taste of it, the sweetness and warmth it would bring to his belly.

He watches as Ghost considers him for a moment before his weight withdraws from beside him, standing before making his way over to the shelf above the table. He pushes empty bottles to the side before he procures one filled with clear liquid, and when he catches John's eye, he swashes the bottle around in invitation. John sits up in haste, surprised to find anything so far out here.

A man of many talents, indeed.

“You've been holdin' out on me,” John says in disbelief as the bottle is handed over to him, too distracted by the prospect of alcohol to focus much on the way their hands brush, although he pleasantly cards that to the back of his mind, the touch leaving a soft hum in his veins.

“You'd drink me dry,” Ghost remarks blandly, and John shoots him a mock glare as he uncorks the bottle, taking a smell of its contents and pulling a face at the burn that sears inside his nose.

“Aye, this is strong,” He says, before taking a cautious swig. He gasps as the burn slides to wreak havoc on his throat, the strength of the drink more or less what he had anticipated but still strong all the same. “The hell is this?” He rasps, coughing as he passes the bottle back to Ghost.

“Being picky are we?” Ghost asks as he sits and raises the cloth around his mouth, a smile twisting at the corners as he follows John and throws a mouthful back.

“Beggars can't be choosers,” John shrugs as the coughing settles, only hesitating a moment before he's accepting the bottle tipped his way.

“Sláinte,” He raises in toast before he's knocking it back, his sip fuller this time. He doesn't even bother letting it roll across his tongue before he swallows. This wasn't the type of drink to savor.

Ghost's eyes are dark when he meets them again, passing the bottle back, and Ghost doesn't look away as he accepts it.

“Satisfied?” he asks.

“It’ll do,” John nods.

And that’s how they spend their evening, slowly trading the bitter drink back and forth until John feels properly loosened, a buzz in his ears and the cabin slowly tilting if he moves his head too much. He’s got a smile properly plastered on his face and he knows it, but can’t be damned too much to care enough to wipe it off. The alcohol frees his tongue, and he doesn’t know what he prattles off with into the night, but Ghost doesn’t seem to mind, ever silent as he sits next to John while he rambles.

When the bottle has but a quarter left, never having been quite full, John calls it quits, flopping his head down into Ghost’s lap with something like a giggle, peering up as Ghost looks down at him, dark eyes almost fond in the light of the fire.

“I’m right fuckin’ pished,” He slurs happily, smiling up at Ghost in his daze. Ghost chuckles, the sound sliding pleasantly down John’s spine and into his toes. John can see the way his mouth curls with the action, a beckoning taunt in the slurry of John’s mind. The curve of them an invitation, lost in the haze.

He reaches to slide his thumb against the corner of it, pressing in lightly.

The smile seems to wipe away, and John pouts as he pushes the corner up, a stubborn attempt to bring it back. He missed the sight of it, now that it was gone.

“What are you doing?” Ghost mumbles against the thumb, and when pushing doesn’t work John presses his fingers against his cheek, cupping his face as he pushes that upwards instead, stretching the skin.

“Ye should smile more,” John sighs.

“Why would I do that?” His eyes are dark pools even as the firelight catches and glints off them, searching for an answer as John’s hand slides down to his chin before his fingertips fall off of it, giving up when Ghost doesn’t follow his simple request.

“Cause I asked ye so nicely,” John says sweetly.

Ghost gives him a dry look before he tears his gaze away to look past

him into the fire with a shake of his head. He pulls the bottle back to his mouth, tipping it until the liquid reaches his lips.

“It’s a pretty smile,” John quips when Ghost refuses to give him any type of response, watching the bob of his Adam’s apple as he takes his drink. Thirsty suddenly himself, his mouth parched as he watches the motion through his lashes.

Ghost coughs on the drink, wiping the spittle from his mouth with the back of his hand as he sends a glare down to where John lays. John just grins up at him, a picture of innocence even as he flirts so unabashedly.

“You’d be the first to say so,” Ghost rasps, wiping again at his mouth as he places the bottle somewhere to the side, out of sight.

“But certainly not the first to know,” John shoots back.

Ghost’s eyes narrow to slits as he glares daggers down at John again. “Keep your opinions to yourself.” He grunts, although there isn’t much malice behind his words.

“You’ve got pretty eyes too,” John continued anyway. “Willin’ to bet a hefty pocket you’re a picture under that mask of yours.” He teases.

“You’re drunk,” Comes Ghost’s reply, followed by a scoff as he rolls his eyes at John’s antics.

“Aye, that I am, n’ you’re pretty,” John yawns, stating away like it was part of the obvious.

“Tired?” Ghost changes the subject, leaning his elbow just shy of John’s head as he rests against his fist, leaning down over John as he uses his other hand to gently card through John’s hair. John hums pleasantly at the touch, slipping his eyes closed as a small smile stretches contentedly across his face.

“Not if you aren’t coming with me,” He yawns again, using a hand to stifle the action.

“Shameful,” Ghost huffs, and John peaks through his lashes to find a small smile gracing the curve of his lips, just enough that his eyes seem bright in the din of the room.

“There it is,” he sighs, drinking in the sight in matching fondness.

“Shameful,” Ghost whispers again.

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Eventually the two of them make their way to bed, Ghost helping John stand as he tumbles a bit with the action. He knows he will pay for the drink in the morning, but for now he is nothing but a giggling mess, throwing his weight into Ghost as he helps him along.

“Did I ever tell you how heavy you are?” Ghost grunts, and John laughs at the accusation, somehow delighted.

John falls into the furs with a stumble, laughing harder as he lands on his bum. He pulls at Ghost’s hands to follow him, and Ghost falls to his knees with a laugh of his own, helping push John along into his corner to make space for the both of them on the small pile of pelts.

When both are properly laid out and Ghost’s mask is placed to the side, John forgoes the pillow instead to place his head in the crook of Ghost’s arm, resting his head heavily across his chest with an ease he wasn’t sure he would have if the alcohol didn’t thrum in his veins. Ghost tenses for only a moment, before cautiously he curls further into John, wrapping an arm slowly around his waist as he settles his chin atop John’s head. John sighs into him, burying into the feel of him with a slow desperation, wrapping his own arm around him in response.

“Is this...okay?” Ghost asks after a moment, like he wasn’t quite in the belief that the two of them were curled together, although they had been here several times before. John can feel the beat of his heart against his forehead and the bridge of his nose where it was buried into him. A steady, thumping clash against his skin. One John would trade anything to feel for the rest of his life at that moment.

“Aye,” he breathes, taking in the smell of him, musk and pine a comforting anchor throughout his senses.

They lay in perfect silence until Ghost’s heart settles somewhere in tandem with John’s own, and it isn’t until John is almost asleep that he hears a quiet voice above him.

“Goodnight, Johnny.”

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Morning comes with a headache and a bitter taste in the back of his

throat.

He groans as he buries himself further into weight that envelopes him, morning come too soon. Somehow in the night their legs had become entangled with one another, and despite the blooming hangover that leached at his pleasant mood, he was right content to lay there forever, so long as Ghost would have him.

A chuckle reverberates through the chest he's pressed so snugly against, and he groans again as it rattles his head more.

"Awake?" Ghost asks.

John mumbles something like the affirmative into his chest, mouth dry as he slurs across the words. He feels a hand slowly thread through his hair, maybe in sympathy as Ghost pulls away from him. John chases the feel of him, not daring to open his eyes as he whines for the lost contact.

"You need water," Ghost huffs a laugh, and John finally peeks to watch him grab for the water skin, passing it into John's hands.

John regretfully pulls away and props himself on his elbow, drinking the water down until the bitter taste is gone from him. He passes the skin back to Ghost, and Ghost gently places it on the side before he's sitting up with a stretch, John falling back into the covers with a sigh.

"Don't suppose you're up for hunting today?" Ghost asks, turning at the waist to ruffle John's hair. John swats at the movement, rattling his headache as Ghost chuckles.

"No. How can you even move?" John sighs, waiting for the headache to settle into something more courteous to his good morning.

"Practice," Ghost says as he raises to step out of the bed. John mocks his 'practice' under his breath, and lolls his head to the side to watch Ghost put on his boots and take time to stoke the fire with another log.

"I'll be back later today," Ghost promises as he grabs for his cloak. "Rest up," He nods towards John before he's unsticking the door.

"Aye," John calls before he's properly through, and watches as Ghost throws a wave over his shoulder before he closes the door.

John misses the comfort of Ghost as he lays into the late morning, eyes closed tight to the light cascading in through the windows as he nurses his hangover. He felt a little bad being in such a state that he couldn't follow Ghost out into the wilderness, but he would have been useless in his current state.

He can still hear Ghost's voice in his hair, the feel of him all throughout his limbs. He wished Ghost had stayed long enough to comfort him, could use the weight of him even though he knew Ghost had obligations of his own.

He lays until the morning bleeds into afternoon before he decides to get up, his headache slowly but surely giving way enough that the room doesn't seem too daunting. He busies himself around the cabin, setting the bed right and keeping an eye on the fire, sitting on the rug with the waterskin close by in order to keep hydrated.

Ghost returns with yet another fowl just as the night outside begins to dim and the fire lights up the room. John welcomes him as he joins him at the table, helping pluck the bird as their shoulders brush one another in tandem, each time a little jolt through John's system, as if they hadn't just spent the night *cuddling* one another.

John blames each rush on his hangover, even though he knows it's not the case. Knows in the forefront of his mind that he's just as antsy for Ghost to touch him as ever.

When dinner is properly done and their bowls are clear, Ghost takes John's from his hand and sets them off to the side, aborting John's movement to stand up to clean them.

"Put your cloak on," He says cryptically, standing to collect his own from where it hangs.

"Why?" John asks, but moves to the dresser anyway to collect the cloth, pulling it around his shoulder in mimic to Ghost's own state.

"Just follow me," Ghost motions, walking over to the door and holding it open for John. John gives him a questioning look before he steps out into the night, Ghost taking up the rear behind him and closing the door before taking the lead, gently pulling on John's hand as he passes.

John lets him be carted around the side of the cabin, and then into the woods in a direction they had yet to truly explore. He has no clue where Ghost could possibly be taking them but follows where the

hand demands, watching his step where Ghost cautions him to.

They make their way down the hillside, over rocky tundra that Ghost slowly guides him down. They walk for so long John almost asks where they are going, before by the light of the full moon he catches the sight of a clearing up ahead, the sound of trickling water slowly filling his ears.

They step out onto rocky surface, John taking in the small pool of water that sits on the tail end of a stream, steam pillowing across the surface into the night air.

“What is this?” John asks as Ghost lets go of his hand gently, stepping further into the clearing as he shrugs off his cloak.

“Hot spring. Rare enough around these parts,” He answers.

“We’re going...swimming?” John asks as he watches Ghost take off his shirt, eyes following the muscle of his back, heart a thunder in his chest as he swallows.

“Undress,” Is all that Ghost responds with, commands of him as if it were something simple.

Mouth dry, he follows Ghost’s movements, folding the cloth on a nearby rock as he shimmies out of his pants and shirt. When he’s left with nothing but his long johns, he glances briefly to take in the state of Ghost.

He quickly pulls his eyes away as he gets a clear view of his arse, shapely by the looks of it. He wants to groan as he bites into his lip. He hadn’t been prepared for the sight.

Ghost looks over his shoulder at him, and judging by the mirth in his eyes John could tell he was smirking under that blasted mask of his.

“Come on then, don’t have all night,” He motions, and John flips him off just because he can.

Slowly he steps out of his undergarments into the nude, shielding himself from the cold as he steps up alongside Ghost, squarely keeping his eyes in front of him, despite the longing for them to stray.

“Close your eyes,” Ghost orders, and John follows it only because it’s Ghost. He feels a motion from his side, and hears the rustling of cloth as Ghost strips the last bit of it from him. John swallows and shuts his

eyes even harder, although he desperately wanted to take a peek at him. Ghost was trusting him, and he would do well to remember it.

Gently a hand reaches for John's own, brushing against his arm in askance and he grasps at it in clutch. Ghost guides him forward until his feet touch water, and the heat of it makes him gasp in surprise, a delightful curl of water against his toes.

He can hear as Ghost slips into the water, pulling John forward slowly as he guides his movements. John keeps his eyes closed, trusting in Ghost to not let him slip and fall as he wades into the water. They stop when John can feel the heat about waist height, and then there is a pressure on his shoulder for him to squat down, and so he does, sighing into the feel of the warm bath as he goes.

"How's that?" Ghost asks low, hand still in John's as he leads them deeper into the spring, pulling John after him.

"Sinful," John groans, relaxing as they come to a stop again. They're settled about chest height now in what John assumes is the deepest of the spring.

He hears Ghost chuckle, and John mourns that he cannot see his face, to see the smile spread across his lips like he so desperately craved. He releases Ghost's hand to raise his own in search of him, hands hovering in the air before him in question.

"Can I?" He breathes.

He feels Ghost's fingers press against the back of his own before they pull his hands forward, just enough to graze the sides of his jaw before John can't help but slide his hands across them. He swipes his thumb against cool lips that part beneath his hands. It isn't long at all before he's exploring him in his entirety, across the bridge of his nose and along the scars that adorn him. One hand slips into his hair, noting the shortness of it, knowing it blond. He feels bold.

"Told ye," He sighs, running his fingers back down Ghost's cheeks. He licks his lips in the humid air.

"Told me what?" Ghost's voice is rough compared to the softness of his words, and it takes all of John's willpower not to open his eyes right then and there.

"You're pretty."

He feels Ghost press against his hands, stepping closer in the water until John can feel his breath caress his lips. He was so close now that John could move inches, he knew, to close the gap between them, heart a haywire pull in his chest as he kept himself still from rocking forward and getting the taste of him he so desperately wanted. Tonight was on Ghost's terms, he knew, and he had always been but helpless to follow him.

"Johnny," He feels his name more than he hears it.

"Ghost," He sighs back.

They sit in the water for an aching amount of time, neither moving, and John is about to close the gap himself, Ghost be damned, before another name is whispered against his mouth.

"Simon."

John stills impossibly further, nearly opening his eyes in surprise but keeping them shut despite himself. "What?"

"My name. It's Simon," Ghost says carefully, and John feels elation settle into his chest, can feel it *pull* him.

"*Simon*," He breathes, and in the next moment John couldn't tell who had moved first, only that warm lips were on his.

It's achingly slow, the feel of *Simon* on his tongue. He chants his name like a mantra, a prayer all of his own in between each kiss, in between each slide of their lips. There is no air, none other than the breath of *Simon* as he inhales him in, running his hand through his hair and cupping his face as he pushes them chest to chest.

He wanted Simon to *devour* him.

"Johnny," Simon pants with a broken voice of his own, an answering call to the name that refuses to leave John's tongue. So sweet on John's ears that he presses impossibly closer, gripping the nape of his neck in a stronghold to keep him there. John bites gently into the plush of his bottom lip before he's peppering kisses along his jaw line, a 'Simon' between each one before he's dipping down into his neck to slide his tongue deliciously along the tendon.

Simon groans, hands gripping at John hard enough to bruise. John lifts his head to press back into Simon's mouth, to taste the moan for himself as he runs his tongue across the bottom of his lip. Simon

presses in to deepen the kiss, chasing after him as if John were even considering to pull away now that he had him.

“Simon,” he pleads, for anything he would give him. Anything at all as lust pools low into his belly. The touch of him, the taste of him, John would take anything, would give anything so long as his mouth stayed on his. What he had craved for so long, and now had, John was nearly dizzy from the high of him.

Simon kisses him like he’s trying to fight a fire, and John lets him, ignited under his touch. His hands move to caress any bit of skin, exploring him in a way he had only hoped for, running his hands down his chest and across his ribs, settling on his back where he dug his nails in just to be *closer*.

John whines as he feels the swell of his cock press against his thigh, an answering hardness to John’s own as he slides their hips together. He feels Simon let go of him to snake his way down across his belly, knuckles running over the skin before he takes them both in hand, giving a cautionary tug.

John hisses as the contact, rutting into his fingers. He feels Simon chuckle against the corner of his mouth before he’s stroking them both in tandem, groaning across John’s lips in a way that nearly sends him to his knees. It does nothing to stop his name from crossing John’s breath as he takes John’s mouth for his own, slotting his tongue against his teeth.

John unwinds at the feel of him, the feel of *them*. He breaks a hand away to cover Simon's own, following each stroke. Simon mumbles a broken curse into his mouth and John practically melts into the ache of his voice.

John knows he won’t last long, not with the pace Simon had set for them, but he holds it back with all his worth, wanting nothing more than to keep Simon’s hands on him for as long as he can. Each stroke brings him closer than the last, however, and he lets a whine seep through his teeth into Simon’s mouth.

“Don’t stop,” He pleads, bucking into Simon's hold of him, wishing to be impossibly closer as Simon grips them tight enough it nearly hurts, the rough palm of his hand a delightful contrast to the softness of John’s own. Simon answers by kissing along his jaw, wet mouth exploring down into his neck before he bites into the skin, causing John to cry out in embarrassing surprise.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, love,” Simon pants against his neck right next to where John was sure bite marks were branded into his skin. He gives a low whine at the pet name, saying his name like the curse it was.

“M close,” He mumbles as Simon’s mouth finds him again. He feels him pull away just enough, that he mourns the loss, chasing after him before his rough voice halts him in his tracks.

“Look at me,” Simon commands him, and John knows he’s a goner even before he can open his eyes in surprise.

Pupils blown wide, mouth a red line from where John’s had been not moments ago. The close crop of his hair, a soft blonde in the light of the moon, and the supple part of his lips. Scars and all, he was just as handsome as he knew him to be and John can’t hold back any longer as a broken ‘Fuck’ breaks from his lips. He tips his head back as he savors the last few strokes, eyes never straying from Simon’s.

He cums in their hands, and it’s not but a few strokes later Simon is falling against his neck, groaning against his skin, spent.

They stay like that for a while, Simon’s breath a fog against the crevice of his neck as his hand lets go of them to slide along John’s hip, gripping it tight as they get their bearings. John watches the moon high in the sky, head swimming in a pleasant hum as his breathing slowly settles into something normal before he’s slipping his eyes closed again, resting his head atop Simon’s as the other man nestles into the crook of his neck.

With slow kisses, Simon works his way up John’s jaw before he’s slowly sliding across his mouth again. Lazy in the way he brings their lips together, slow and teasing. John sighs into the feel of him, carding fingers across the nape of his neck and into fine hairs. He never wanted the night to end, but knew soon it would.

“We should clean up, love,” Simon says, the use of the pet name slipping out across his teeth and John whines as he pulls away. The water had done a good job of that already, but John had been without a proper bath for weeks now, and knew he was in desperate need of a good one.

He nods as he sinks and leans back to wet his hair, giving it a good scrub as Simon dunks his head under the water fully, rising to shake his head like a wet dog as he runs a hand over his face. John laughs and splashes water his way as the flecks of it pepper his skin, and

Simon answers with his own wave, a smile beautifully filling his face.

Without the high he had been chasing when the two of them were slotted together, John can properly get a look at his face now. The way the moonlight glows against his pale skin, the way it dances in the dark of his eyes.

“I was wrong,” John smiles, pressing close again to whisper a kiss against his cheek before he takes Simon’s lips into his own, kissing him deeply.

“About?” Simon whispers against him.

“You’re not just pretty. You’re beautiful.” He hums.

Simon, somehow shy in the face of the words with no mask between them, ducks his head to slide his cheek against John’s own. He mumbles something that doesn’t quite reach his ears, and John huffs a laugh.

“Speak up, dear. I didn’t hear you.”

“I said you’re prettier than me,” Simon mumbles louder, and John slides his arms around him even as he giggles into the night, bringing Simon into his gentle hold.

“Impossible,” he breathes as he smiles into Simon’s hair.

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Eventually the night comes to an end, and the two of them wade through the water to the edge of the spring, stepping out into the night air that was a little too cold to be without shiver. They dress as quickly as they can, John faster than Simon.

When Simon goes to fix the mask in place, John reaches out, steadying his hand before he can wrap the cloth around his head. “Just for tonight,” he softly begs, Simon’s hand following as he presses to lower it. Simon’s eyes stare deep into his own for a moment before he’s giving a tentative nod, letting his hand fall to his side, leaving the mask off as it dangles in his hand. John smiles his gratitude and kisses him sweetly before taking his free hand, ready to make the long trek back to the cabin.

Simon walks them through the woods, once more by hand and careful of leading John through the rockier parts, ever the gentleman. They

don't speak as they're guided by the light of the moon, footfalls as quiet as the remaining snow will allow them as they make their way through the night.

Slowly but surely, the cabin comes into view, and they hike the last remaining steps until they're pushing through the entryway, Simon after John. The fire is dim, and John steps away to throw a log onto it.

They put away their cloaks in their respective spots, Simon's from the rafters while John folds his into the drawers. When John turns, he finds Simon not far behind him, taking John by the waist as he brushes their noses together. He presses a warm kiss to John's mouth, slower than all the kisses before it, tender and sweet, and John melts into him with a sigh.

"Bed?" John asks, and Simon nods against him before he's pulling them back across the cabin, stumbling into the furs as they both sink down to the floor, entangling even before they're properly laid out. John fumbles with the covers, dragging the pelt across them before Simon's head is laid out on his chest, snuggling in closer as if John would let him stray any farther. John kisses the crown of his forehead before wrapping an arm around him, sighing for the final time that night as they lay for rest.

"Goodnight, Simon." He mumbles into his hair.

"Goodnight, Johnny."

Chapter End Notes

About 3 more chapters to go if I do this right :)

I've never wrote porn so that was an experience. Hopefully it was good porn and not bad porn lmao.

I'm not gonna even pretend to know when the next update is because this was a surprise. But hey, we'll get there.

Love you all so much <3

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Waking up comes in the form of the sweetest of mornings, John opening his eyes and finding Simon still asleep beside him. His face is a picture of peace, his lips parted and lashes fanning across his cheeks, quiet breaths crossing the gap between them. John could stare at him forever.

Gently, as to not wake him, he slides his thumb across his cheekbone, reveling in the sight of him in the soft morning light that shines through the window across them. Beautiful was the closest word he could find for the man that laid next to him, but he found the definition somehow lacking. There were no words to describe the sight of him, perfect in the halo of golden glow.

John was in love with him.

He knew it softly, felt the revelation settle across his chest with a warm delight that outdid the sun. He was in love with him so deeply he felt an ache for him even as they were tangled together, missing the feel of him on his mouth, in his hands, the sound of his voice. He presses his lips gently to the bridge of Simon's nose, delicate, before he rests his head back on the pillow, content to watch him with all the love in his heart.

Simon.

John was not a religious man by any means, but he named every god in prayer that he could in quiet thank you that he had found this man. Thankful for the night he was torn open, would relive the pain and agony a thousand times again if it always led him back to him. Would bleed for him, ache for him, give him all of himself if he would only ask for it.

How could he leave him now, when Simon had become his home? Had settled center along his veins, working his way to make cave inside his heart.

He cared not which four walls or what village or hell, what valley they settled in, so long as Simon were to remain with him. So long as Simon were to keep him by his side, so long as their love never came

to pass, John knew he'd care not. Rain or snow, blood and skin, he would follow Simon to the ends of the earth if he so asked for it. Would stand on the very edge with the world to their backs just so they could step into the stars.

As he takes in his lover so close, he knows it's all wishful thinking in the end. Duty an arrow to his chest, piercing the delicate flesh of his heart. *Obligations*. He would give it all away if he could, but he had come so far with loyalty a weight on his shoulders, and he knew it wasn't a weight he could cast away so carelessly. He had denied a fundamental part of himself for so long now, and he knew in the end he had to go. There were people on the other side of the forest waiting for him, if they hadn't already thought him dead. There was no way he could leave them to wonder.

He rids the bitter thoughts from his mind. A sadness creeping into his feeble form as he lies beside his love who had once been more ghost than man, someone who had become so tangible and so dear to John.

He couldn't leave.

As he lays there, he imagines spending the rest of his life beside Simon, happy days set between these very four walls. Laughter and passion cradled between their aging hands as time wore their skin thin and wrinkled. He saw it so clearly, built a small life for them in the confines of his mind so vivid he had already lived it. Wished to live it so desperately he could feel a wetness soak into the corners of his eyes and swell beneath his lashes.

He wanted to grow old with Simon.

He blinks the tears away before any could fall, swallowing the knot in his throat.

He had to leave, didn't he?

He feels frustration build at the constant trade of his mind, angry that a decision wasn't so simple for them. Would Simon follow him if he asked? Was the love in his heart equal to that of John's? All these questions with no burden of an answer, not when he couldn't bear to ask them of him. Afraid of the answers he'd find.

Three days.

He would give himself three days to make his decision.

-

When Simon opens his eyes, John is waiting for him.

There's a moment where John gets to watch the recognition fill his eyes, a remembrance to the night before. He watches as a slow smile spreads across his face in the light of day, eye's sweet and dancing with a content sense of fondness in his gaze.

"Morning, love," He speaks quietly, as if he were afraid to break the delicate atmosphere that enveloped them.

"Morning," John whispers back just as soundly. He reaches to brush his fingers along the fringe of his hair, and watches as Simon's eyes flutter at the touch. John moves forward to place a kiss gently against his lips, and sighs as they part for him, Simon returning the kiss in small, lazy movements.

The kiss is sweet, like honey. Simon moves in to deepen the press of their lips, slotting his hand across the back of John's head and into his hair, holding him close as pries open John's mouth, pliant under his tongue.

They trade slowly, back and forth, until Simon finally pulls away from him, pupils dark in the iris as he stares half-lidded at John, running his tongue over pink lips as if to savor the taste.

"How long have you been awake?" He asks, settling back into the pillows.

John misses him already. Scant inches separate them and Simon's thumb still caresses the skin behind his ear, and yet he yearns for him.

"A while now," He answers truthfully.

Simon hums as his hand slides down into the crevice of John's neck, fingertip brushing over pulse point and anchoring there as he presses for the feel of it.

"Will you follow me today?" He asks, a question of whether or not John would like to participate in today's hunt. Yet in John's mind, he nearly breathes that he would follow him anywhere.

"Aye," he whispers instead, earlier thoughts a cloud in his mind. The fresh air would do well to aid his heavy thoughts, those he could not yet voice between the walls they huddled in.

Simon quirks the side of his mouth, as though John were a book with its pages clear on display, giving one last final caress against his jaw line before he's rolling away, throwing back the covers to stand for the day.

John lays amongst the furs for a moment longer if only to watch him move around the cabin, stoking the fire into life again before gathering the dishes that they had abandoned the night before. Simon peeks over at him when he doesn't move, and his eyes soften into something loving as he places a hand on his hip.

"You coming or not?" He asks, not an ounce of anything but love in the deep rumble of his voice. It calls to John sweetly, and he rises from the pillows at the beckon.

"Aye."

-

They find a hare, limp and tired from its struggle, in one of the traps Simon had set up next to a rabbit hole not far from the cabin. Simon properly puts the poor animal out of its misery before he works to untangle it.

Despite the short walk back home, John slips his hand into Simon's free one, slotting them palm to palm as he tangles their fingers together. Simon squeezes them briefly before he relaxes into the touch, sending a smirk John's way but keeping their hands together all the same. John breathes a sigh of contentment into the open air, smiling softly at the warmth of him, bumping shoulder to shoulder as they walk together.

They prepare dinner together as always, and sit across from each other when the meal is finished.

Despite asking for only a night, it isn't lost on John how the mask remains resting by the bedside, unmoved and untouched from the night before. It makes a sweetness bloom in his chest, that Simon would continue his request without John having to speak his preference. He smiles into his bowl but doesn't comment on it, keeping his thankfulness to himself.

They wash the dishes together when the meal comes to a pass, and when they come to settle back on the rug for the evening, John sits squarely in Simon's lap with a mischievous grin in place as he presses into Simon's form.

Simon gives a small ‘oof’ at the action with a small chuckle in John’s ear, but he doesn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around John’s waist, holding him close. His chin settles on John’s shoulder, staring peacefully into the fire as John leans back against his chest, happy to follow his lead.

The evening sings a peaceful song as they simply take in the comfort of one another. John runs his hands over where Simon rests his arms, over old scars and the healing bite marks, the wrappings gone now but the wound still broken flesh. He looks down at the more recently injured arm, and his fingertips dance along the indents gently.

“They look well,” he mumbles, much to his relief. Infection had skipped its poison and while he was sure there would be scars, they would heal all the same.

“Thanks to you,” Simon squeezes him gently, rocking his head to lay against John’s.

It had felt like ages ago now, with so much coming to pass in their dynamic. John wants to chuckle at his past self, if only he had known. He couldn’t imagine another accident like that with the John he was now, with the them that had come to pass. He would be inconsolable, he was sure.

He hums a laugh despite himself, an ease in his chest that he and Simon were both safe now. Knew he would do anything to keep it that way, should ever that test come for them.

The roaring of the fire lulls him with its heavenly crackle, and he finds his eyes drooping low as he allows himself to tip his weight against Simon’s chest. He smiles when he feels Simon slowly kiss spots across his neck, up until he finds himself just below John’s ear. He suckles at the lobe, and John laughs at the tickle, squeezing his arms in closer against his belly as he hiccups with the motion.

There was such a joy in his heart.

-

They fall into bed much as they had the night before, curling into the other like they were the last of one another.

Perhaps he *would* be the last for him, John thinks, unbidden. How could anyone compare to the light of him? Who could hold a torch to cast shadow against the glow of his embers?

Oh how John was in love.

When the night grows deep and Simon's breathing is even and slow, lost to dreams, John holds him close and speaks it into the night, if only so the walls and the rafters should hear it, etch it into the aging wood and carve it alongside the slots of the board.

"I love you."

-

The second day comes with the shallow patter of rain upon the window. John comes to, not with his eyes open, but with soft lips kissing him awake. He smiles into the press of them, letting them find the corner of his mouth and then his cheeks, his nose, the lids of his eyes and then finally his forehead, where they settle to rest. Simon holds him close in embrace, and John sighs into the fall of him.

'I love you', he doesn't speak.

He listens to the rain and the quiet exhale of Simon's breaths, ingraining the morning into his mind so he could never forget it. Each drop, every rise and fall of his chest. He held it close, so dearly so that he could never give it away, engraved into the very of his being.

There is nothing but the silence between them, just the indulgent company of one another as they lay in each other's hold. Simon runs his fingertips across John's back in nonsensical patterns, alighting his skin in gooseflesh where they trickle and run. When John finally opens his weary, sleep-deep eyes, he falls into soft brown as Simon's head rests along the pillow.

"We've slept in," Simon smiles, a private thing all for John, his voice as soft as the rainfall on the roof.

"We can lay for a little more," John answers, more of a plea to hold him for a little while longer, just until the rain has come to pass.

Simon moves until his chest covers John, lying above him as he presses more candied kisses across his face. When he's seemingly had his fill he smiles across John's lips.

"And what of the day?" John feels the words curl into his mouth, and he captures them between his teeth just to savor them.

"It can wait," He promises.

The answer seems to sate something within Simon as he pulls John in deeper, wrapping a hand across his nape and pulling his mouth in to kiss him further.

John closes his eyes and lets him.

-

The rain doesn't stop until the morning had come well to pass, but neither seemed to mind. When the final drop calls for their humble forms, Simon coaxes him to rise by chasing him with kisses that make John giggle as they're peppered along his skin. He humors his love and gets up, joint and limbs sore from their late rise but achingly just as sweet. He helps Simon get the cabin prepped for the day, working in their easy rhythm that comes so naturally now, and it isn't long before Simon's cloak is around his shoulders and he's bringing John in to kiss him farewell.

"Stay here for today, in case the rain starts again," He says in lieu of goodbye. John nods, tilting his head up for one final parting kiss.

"Be safe."

"Always am."

And with that Simon steps out from the confines of their home and into the forest.

-

John busies his day by cleaning the cabin. He washes the floors and does the small amount of laundry that had piled. He cleans out the chamberpot and double inspects the dishes for any leftover mess they had missed. He wipes down the windows and even pulls one open, the smell of petrichor heavy in the air. It has always been one of his favorite smells, and he lets it air out the cabin with its cool breeze before it soaks the warmth out of the fire and he has to close it again.

Throughout his cleaning, he finds the tiny mountain lion he had whittled so long ago, set on a shelf. He laughs, the crude figure uneven where it stands, one leg shorter than all the others. He takes it in hand, delighted. If truth were being told, he would have thought it tossed into the fire shortly after he had made it, but here it remains, and he sets it back down in his home after he swipes the dust out from under it.

Ghost comes home late, and it only takes one glance of his around the cabin before he's descending down upon John with a heavy press of his lips.

"Thank you," He rumbles and John smiles against him.

"Had to find something to do while ye were gone." He mumbles between each kiss.

He was filled with so much happiness, it threatened to over spill from his veins, barely had the room for it in his lungs.

They eat dinner as the rain begins again, a heavier fall than that of the quiet patter of this morning. John doesn't mind it, comforted by the sound as he bites into the stew.

When the bowls are clear, Simon sets them off to the side before quietly pulling John back to the bed, laying him down amongst the furs. He slides a hand under John's tunic as he kisses him close, a heat underlying his every movement and bleeding its warmth into John's chest, his skin, his belly.

There was nothing quiet about his gentle caress, raking up John's shirt until it hitches just below his chin, swiping his thumbs across his chest and over the nipples, pressing into where they rise at the friction. John arches into the touch, a sigh swallowed by his love as he kisses him anew.

"Johnny," Simons pants, hands a cinder where they lay on him in question and John catches, aflame by the broken in his voice. The clear want that bleeds between them in open wound.

He catches a moan between his teeth as Simon moves to trail kisses across his chest, suckling and leaving pink lover's marks as he descends. He runs his teeth amongst the hollow of his rib cage, swipes his tongue across the hairs of his navel. Deeper, deeper, until he's biting into the rim of his waistband, nose pressing into sensitive skin as he lets out a sound akin to that of a growl.

"Can I?" Simon breathes through where his teeth clench, letting the waistband snap as he moves even further, his breath a heat through the cloth as grazes where John's center rises to meet him.

John keens as he mouths through the fabric, softly grazing his teeth

across the width of him.

“Anything,” John answers him, hips a traitor as they move to press against the feel of him, heat a swelter in his gut.

Simon needs no more encouragement than that, prying him free and pressing his palm to the base, a firm squeeze as he slides up until his thumb pushes along the bottom of the head where precum beads at its tip.

He licks slow kisses up underneath the strain of his cock, John a helpless, unraveling mess. He whines as Simon presses the head between two lips, swiping his tongue to catch the buildup of precome that had been in close danger of leaking over, licking into the slit as if to savor the taste.

“Please,” John moans from above him, hands gripping into the furs in restraint. He reveled in the slowness and yet still wanted him faster. Would take anything he gave him, so long as that mouth never left him.

“Patience, love,” Simon chuckles, moving to swipe his tongue lazily around the crown as he suckles on the tip, inching his way further as John makes embarrassing, whining pants. He can’t help the way his hips buck into the heat of his mouth, and a hand comes to press them steady, holding him in place as Simon explores him with his mouth.

It’s an aching adventure, as Simon pumps him with his hand and sucks with his mouth. A devastating combination for John’s reserve as he attempts to lay as the man asked of him.

Simon unravels him beneath his tongue, and John is helpless to stop him. He raises his head, just a bit, to take in the sight of him and has to bite back the noise that threatens to bleed from his throat as he does. Simon is a picture between his legs. Dark, lust hazy eyes lifting to catch his own, and John has to look away unless he comes undone too soon, throwing an arm across his eyes as he falls back into the pillows.

Simon gives an unsatisfied squeeze at his base, a warning perhaps as he removes his mouth.

“Look at me.”

John groans at the demand, lifting his arm just enough so that he can follow the order Simon had given him. Satisfied, licking the spittle

from his lips, Simon slowly takes him back in mouth, pressing his tongue against the head and making sure John is watching all the while.

“Please,” He pants again, open mouthed on a whine as Simon dips down to take him whole.

“Simon,” He chokes, bucking against his hold even as Simon presses to keep him still. He bobs his head like a man with all the time in the world, driving John crazy as the soft heat of his mouth spreads pleasure to each and every one of his limbs. John can feel it all the way down the curl of his toes, where they anchor into the furs.

“Can I trust you to be good?” Simon rasps as he pops John from his mouth, hand sliding from where it had been holding his hips steady.

“Yes,” He chants, “Yes,” - anything to get the feel of his mouth on him again. “*Please*, Simon.”

Simon’s hand disappears from his waist, to where John knows not as Simon takes him in shallow again, a groan echoing aching into his cock as he goes.

“Fuck,” Simon nearly *purrs* as he strokes to fill in for his missing mouth, panting against John’s cock as John catches the movement of his shoulder. John is nearly spent right there, as he catches sight of a red, swollen head tight in fist as Simon jerks himself to the same rhythm he has set for John. Simon repeats the curse, eyes falling shut before capturing more precome between his lips, sucking John down in one fluid motion.

John can’t take his eyes off him, moaning an writhing with increasing frequency the faster Simon goes down on him, aided on now by where his own hand encourages him to pleasure John faster.

John can feel the swell of his release build with every bob of his head, so close he can feel the ache of it.

“Simon. Simon baby, *please*.” He can’t help the way his hand flies to grip into Simon’s hair, can’t help the way he pulls.

Simon nearly chokes on the groan that leaves his mouth, a filthy sound as he takes John in his mouth for a final time. John cums with a cry, barely a warning as he feels himself spread across Simon’s tongue, the heat of him deep into his mouth.

A rumble vibrates through the softening of his cock as Simon jerks to a slow stop. He sucks him one final time before John slips out of his mouth, his spent cock lying limp as Simon presses breathless kisses to his thigh.

They lay in twin ecstasy, savoring the moment for just a while longer before Simon is rising in search of a cloth to clean himself. John lays panting, a heavenly boneless weight in the afterglow.

Simon comes back to him after his search is complete, tossing the rag away as come to lie beside John again. John presses a kiss to his mouth, deep enough that he can taste the bitterness of himself across Simon's tongue.

They lie trading slow kisses until neither can be sure who had fallen off first, falling into quiet sleep as somnus casts his warm glow upon them.

-

John knows even before his bones are ready to rise that he was a man out of time.

Rain continues its pattern against the roof, a quiet tap dance along the window as John looks out to gray clouds, heavy with no inclination of passing.

Today was the day, and wasn't it the picture it should be for his heavy mood.

Simon is close behind him in rising, stretching out over the covers before he's lolling his head to the side, a smile on his lips. Unaware.

"More rain, aye?" John speaks softly, allowing himself to be tucked into Simon's side as he pulls him in.

"Spring making its mark," Simon chuckles. "Least it's not more snow."

If only it were, John disagrees in the confines of his mind.

"I'll hunt again today," Simon runs a hand along his back, maybe mistaking his somber mood for the weather. John nods against his chest, kissing the soft spot over his heart to taste the beat of it upon his lips.

Simon readies with the same slow preparation he always does, and

John watches him for what he knows will be the final time, an ache throughout his mind and heart as Simon gives him his sweetest grin at the door.

"I'll be back soon," He promises.

And then he is gone.

-

John spends his day in bed, thinking of how to broach the act of leaving in a way that won't hurt for the both of them.

He knows there was no saving him, not unless Simon would agree so readily to follow him down. He gnaws at his lip until it's nearly bloody, the worry that Simon won't agree. He couldn't stand it for him to say no, not after all they had been through, but he knew he couldn't just expect the man to uproot the life he had so willingly built so far away from any other sort of civilization.

Simon was happy out here.

So was John, he knew.

But leaving had never been a choice, now had it?

He *loved* Simon. Loved him so dearly. How could he have let this come to pass, when he knew the way it would end? How could he have done this to Simon, knowing it would end no differently? He was a fool, he knew, body and soul, to let his only hope rely on Simon choosing him over the lifestyle he had carved for himself.

He's set to pacing a groove into the floor when Simon comes back, soaked and cloak heavy from where he slaps it over the rafters. He's completely unaware of John's troubles as he comes to press a kiss to John's lips, one he accepts because he is a greedy man, and because his touch soothes some of the misery in him, even if only for a moment.

"Simon," he whispers, because the day had taught him a lot about patience, and that it was a vindictive, horrid thing.

Simon must hear the pain of his voice, because he sets his hunt off to the side before coming back to John with a curious look in his eye, wrapping him in his hold.

“What’s wrong?” He asks, and it’s so sincere John can feel the well of tears knot and knead into the back of his throat, threatening to breach his eyes if he doesn’t get it under control. He swallows them back, clearing his voice as he steadies himself for what he knows will come to pass.

“It’s Spring,” He supplies, unhelpfully. Confusion doesn’t leave Simon’s eyes as they search John’s for meaning behind his words. He knows something is wrong, but clarity refuses to set in, although John can see he is trying.

John licks his lips, staring straight ahead at Simon’s chin as he finds the words.

“Every Spring, I help Price with the farm. There’s only a few of us who will do it, and I know how much he relies on me,” He rambles. “We always start working on the farm around the first rain, once the snow is gone and the fields are soft enough for the work.”

Simon gives him no answer, still searching.

“I know they’ve been wondering where I am, Simon.”

Simon slowly unravels from where he holds John, stepping back.

John can’t bear to see the look in his eyes as he ducks his head like a coward to play with the edge of his tunic between his fingers. “I know they probably think I’m dead, but I owe the lot of them for what they’ve done for me. I owe them more than that.”

He knows he’s talking around in circles as Simon steps past him, closer to the fire. John doesn’t turn to follow him, letting his words sink in, the meaning behind them, too afraid to speak the rest of them outloud.

It’s an endless stretch of silence between the both of them as Simon takes in his confession. John fumbles with what to say, how to convince him that John was worth following down into the village, when a soft voice reaches his ears.

“Then go.”

John’s heart drops somewhere past his knees and simultaneously rises into his throat.

“Simon,” he pleads, turning, anguish in his voice. “Simon, I’m asking

ye to come with me.”

Simon is a silhouette against the fire, the tense line of his shoulders and where his hands are clenched into fists. He doesn't look at John, but John can see the way his head shakes so slightly.

“I can't.”

John can feel the tears now, let them be damned as they spill over his cheeks and cascade down his throat.

“Simon, *please* I -” There are so many words in his heart that he wishes to speak, but Simon cuts him off with a gruff voice, void of the emotion that swells so strongly inside John's very being.

‘I love you’. He wants to say anyway.

“I'll walk you back to where I found you in the morning. Get some rest.”

Simon's words cut like the ice that had captured them hostage for all these weeks, and John felt them anchor where they hurt the most. Simon wouldn't follow him.

Simon wouldn't follow him.

Simon didn't ask him to stay.

John swallows as he feels his jaw quake where he holds it clenched. He wanted to reach for Simon, take it all back even though he knew he couldn't. He wanted to hold Simon again, to smooth away the hurt in his lungs even though he knew Simon wouldn't fight for him. Ask for forgiveness, even though it wasn't his to beg for. He wanted *Simon*.

But Simon doesn't look at him as he sits on the floor, dinner abandoned as he stares into the fire, a fortress impenetrable between them that he summons out of stone and mortar. John watches it build, and suddenly knows that he was the trowel that built it.

He watches, helpless, as his love stands behind it, brick by brick.

He doesn't look back.

-

John isn't sure if either of them sleep well, as morning comes all too soon.

Simon hadn't joined him throughout the night, but when John rests bleary eyes upon him he finds his head wrapped in cloth, mask firmly set in place again where John supposes maybe it had always belonged. Maybe should have remained, if only so Simon's face wouldn't haunt John for the rest of his days.

John misses the mornings that had come before now, where he could kiss him freely and run his hands along skin. Had taken them for granted, now that he knew them to be gone.

Simon must hear when he awakens, because he stands without preamble, walking to the drawers to pull out the cloak John had worn so many times before. He sets it atop the dresser before he's crossing the room without a look in John's direction, opening the door and stepping out into the forest without even closing it behind him.

And invitation, John assumes, or an order.

Despite Simon perhaps wishing to get this over with, John takes his time. He wraps the cloak around his shoulder like the hug he so desperately needs, refusing to let the knot in his throat spill over into something else. He gathers his knife, hooks it into his belt and gently throws the bow and quiver over his shoulders. He takes one final look across the room, anchoring the memory for one final time before finally stepping out into the light.

The ground is wet from the night before, and the strong smell of dirt fills his lungs as he takes a breath to steady himself.

He takes in the sight of Simon -

No, he corrects himself. This was Ghost. The way the man holds himself, closed off from anywhere John can reach. The way his gaze doesn't take a single look at John but sees him all the same, the way he pushes off from where he had been leaning against the shed. He turns his back on John and moves in what John assumed would be their destination point, the place from the night they met.

John keeps the distance as they walk, not wanting to make this more difficult for Ghost than he had to. The man was doing him a favor, even though he owed John nothing.

The walk isn't as long as John expected it to be, and he can't tell how he feels about that as he takes in the wretched morning, clouds still dark overhead as they come to a stop.

He takes a few extra steps forwards before he slows to a stop, turning to take a look back at Ghost as the man finally settles his stare on him, bringing a shiver to John's bones.

There's nothing to be had in those dark eyes, indecipherable in a way they hadn't been in what felt like so long, closed off from his emotion like the very night he had first set them on John.

"Thank ye, for everything."

He wants to run to him, kiss him, tell him the burdens of his heart. He wants to throw that blasted mask into the dirt, cup his face, promise he didn't mean to go. Ask him, again, to come with him if only so they would never have to part, ask him if only he would say yes.

But Ghost doesn't respond to him, simply nods once. He doesn't move from the spot he stands, and John knows he is waiting instead for John to make the final leap in going, one that roots him to the spot if only so the moment never reaches its finale.

"Couldn't leave without ye knowing it," He stalls for time, trying to hear Ghost's voice for one final time. The man doesn't grant his wish as he nods slowly, and John feels his lips tremble knowing this will be the last sight of him. A nod, as though everything they had been through were for naught.

"Right," He ducks down, a nod of his own before he's turning. He only takes a few steps before his resolve peters out.

He can't look at him as he says it, but lets the broken words stumble out while he still has the chance.

"Tha gaol agam ort," He whispers, just loud enough so that he knows Ghost had heard him.

When he's far enough that when he looks back Ghost is nowhere in sight, he cries.

And then, like the clouds had heard his hiccuping gasp, the heavy gray parts and it begins to rain.

Chapter End Notes

Tha gaol agam ort - I love you

Anyway twitter said to keep the angst :P It's outta my hands now.

As always I love you and I promise a happy ending for our boys.
Distance makes the heart grow fonder and all that jazz.

If you haven't already checked out Saragapen's amazing art of the fic, you can catch them on [Twitter!](#)

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Simon's POV

Simon didn't know what year it was, had lost count amongst the seasons, the passage of time a burden only he could only weather.

He had been alone for so long, the days bleeding uselessly together with their constant *nothing* that he wondered if he had died all those years ago. If this was not his hell - his purgatory. Was his way of repenting for his dearest and only crime.

To hell with it, he would curse to open sky, begrudging the very god that put him there. *He would repent for nothing.*

At first, the days would mix together. Oil and water as he built a routine for himself. Sleep, eat, shit, repeat. The middle had no meaning and so he didn't care what order they fell in. His only goal was survival.

Even that sometimes lost its meaning.

The nightmares were bad in the beginning, the crying, the begging, the *refusal*, the loss. It was all that drove him forwards, an act of malice against those that would rather beat and bleed him dead for experiencing an act of love in his heart. He lived if only so that one day news would find him here that they had died before him.

Simon sometimes dreamed of killing them himself. Dreamed of blood dripping from his hands, *savoring it*.

He only let them live now because he couldn't bear to step back into that village, the one separated between mountains and valleys. Had lost his way, in the years that bled his memory dry of paths and pine. He wouldn't know where to find it even if he spent the rest of his life searching for it, and that was Simon's only closure.

His days had always held no meaning to him, not with Gary gone now and all that was left of him being the skull he carried in memoir on his face.

Sometimes, as he held the fragile wood between his palms, he asked himself if he still missed him. The question, a burn through his chest that would whittle its way up his throat, thicker than any of the alcohol he could use to douse the fire.

He mourned for him, he knew for sure, but how does one miss a *ghost* when all it does is haunt him day and night?

His days were as lifeless as the soul he had become, empty and wandering through the trees just to feel something outside those suffocating four walls. He hated his creation, a cage for him to lie in. He couldn't stand the sight of it, and yet it was part of his survival. It was something he must live with, alone. Empty. Devoid of the feeling of home and replaced with vulgar familiarity all the same.

And then came Johnny.

Bright, brilliant, beautiful Johnny.

He had found him by accident, called by the commotion. Cut by his curiosity despite himself. Something unusual to his monotonous days.

What he had found was a man in struggle, severely losing the fight against a beast nearly the size of him. Simon never thought twice about it, axing the damned thing clean across its neck.

Maybe he should have.

The lad had been a handful to get back to the cabin, no where else to go this deep in the forest, and he had looked so pitiful lying there. A waste to the beauty of his face if he were to pass so cruelly. Simon had carried him in his arms slowly, the man jabbering the whole while nonsense he couldn't understand, falling in and out of sleep as he went.

He had tended to him, the best he could anyway with such limited utilities. He had spent days wondering if he would withstand the bloodshed, or if Simon would be digging through the cold hard ground in shallow grave. What he had found was that the man was more stubborn than he looked, and the first time Simon had seen the clear blue of his eyes, he should have known.

-

Simon didn't mean to fall in love with him.

He had been careless, blindsided. Led astray by warm, gentle hands; Scarred by the touch of him but helpless to allow each cut all the same. He would like to say he tried, that he resisted, but Simon knew that was a lie. Johnny had guided him into his cool waters with his grin and teeth and beckoning laughter, and Simon had *drowned* in him.

He should have known it was inevitable, the way he followed the torment like a man starved. An act of malice from god, he was sure. To send him such a beauty that he knew he could never truly lay claim to. Not when Simon was so undeserving.

And yet Johnny wasn't repulsed by his touch, he invited it.

And Simon had been such a fool to savor it.

What had become his cage for so long slowly began to feel like home, and the first time he realized it, it had nearly driven him to his knees.

He had thought he had moved past this. The need for love. The need to be wanted. Had told himself for years that he was made to grow without it. He was stronger that way, resilient, and yet all it took was the touch of Johnny's hands, and he was crumbling, crumbling. The touch of Johnny's hands aging his walls by thousands of years until they were nothing but rubble at his feet.

He should have known he wouldn't stay.

He should have known.

-

"It's Spring," John says to him, and Simon can do nothing but stare back at him. It was true that the ground outside was devoid of most of the snow now, the winds carrying a warmer front for the past few days, even with the cool of the rain. Yet Simon couldn't understand what he was talking about. Why it mattered.

"Every Spring, I help Price with the farm. There's only a few of us who will do it, and I know how much he relies on me," He carries on. "We always start working on the farm around the first rain, once the snow is gone and the fields are soft enough for the work."

'Okay', Simon wants to say, still at a loss for why any of it should matter to them. Johnny wasn't meeting his gaze right now but dinner would be ready as soon as they prepared it, and then Johnny would

curl into him so Simon could press his kisses to him, enough to make him giggle that sweet sound of his. He considers kissing him now, if only to silence the nonsense he's spouting. To soothe away his worries, whatever they may be. But before he can, Johnny continues.

"I know they've been wondering where I am, Simon."

Realization is a dreaded weight where it anchors within him.

Johnny was talking about leaving.

Simon feels the breath leave out of him. Undeserving, undeserving, *undeserving*, playing on repeat in his mind. Of course.

God wouldn't let him keep something so precious.

He has to walk away, moves past Johnny before he can see, before he can beg him, plead with him, to stay.

But he knows he can't keep Johnny. Johnny was never his to take and yet he had taken so much already. Johnny was the sun, in all his light and glory, and how could Simon cloud it with all the darkness he kept within himself?

He speaks his next words with his heart in his throat.

"Then go." *Stay.*

"Simon," Johnny says, and Simon can't bear to hear that tone of voice from him. Something broken. "Simon, I'm asking ye to come with me."

No, he thinks. He can't bear to go through it again. Can't bear to lose Johnny the same way he had lost Gary.

He couldn't do that to him. They had a freedom out here, one Johnny didn't know. To be themselves, away from the prying eyes that would do harm to them if they knew just what they were. To love, without anguish. Simon couldn't live that secret a second time, not with the fear when he knew what came next.

"I can't." *Stay, please.*

"Simon, please I -"

"I'll walk you back to where I found you in the morning. Get some rest." *Tell me you'll stay. Tell me that I'm enough. I'll be enough, just stay,*

please.

But Johnny doesn't. He doesn't say a word as he crawls into the covers of the bed they've shared for so many nights.

He doesn't stay.

-

He watches him go until there's nothing but the oak and pine, nothing but the tracks of his footprints the only tell he had ever been there at all. Simon stands there until the rain washes them away, and then he's stumbling blindly in the direction of his cabin. Faster and faster until he's pushing through the door with shuttering breaths, slamming it closed.

Empty. Like Johnny had never been there at all.

A cage.

He falls to his knees, ripping the mask and cloth from his face, throwing them aside with a clatter as he stares to the floor, his vision swimming with a heat he hadn't felt in *years*.

A hiccuping breath, and then another, and then he is howling on a cry that shreds through his throat.

Come back.

Please.

Come back.

Stay.

Johnny's Pov

The days that follow John back to the village are some of the hardest days of his life.

It isn't that he wasn't welcomed. Quite the opposite. He's welcomed with open arms, cheer, amazement that he had survived all this time. Questions about where he'd been, stories of the search parties that had turned up empty each time.

They had worried for him but never given up hope. Alejandro, Rudy, Price and Gaz had all but dragged him to the pub, a celebration of

sorts.

John tried to feel excited to be home, tried to indulge in the cheer and festivities that the others chipped in to pay for. The prods and jokes about how he had lost weight, laying out meats and meads and wines for the lot of them to consume.

John tried, but nothing could cure the ache in his heart.

He threw himself into his work like a man damned if otherwise. If anyone wanted to find him, they could only do so in the fields from dawn to dusk. Sweat on his skin and his hands blackened with the earth. They were lucky with the sunshine that did nothing for his mood, a sour thing that he knew had bled onto the others, judging by the looks they shared when they thought he wasn't looking. He couldn't be arsed with it. Simon a ghost in his mind and a name he swallowed every time someone asked where he had been.

He didn't talk much about his experience up in the mountains. He couldn't. Not when he was ashamed for the state he left him in, not with his final goodbye carved into his teeth and throat. It took all his willpower not to run for the hills, the village be damned if only so he could see Simon again. The real Simon, not the Ghost that had faced him off.

His cottage was the worst of it. Dusty in his absence, another chore for him to do at the end of his day when his body was sore. He hung out the sheets and washed the musty smell away from the linens. He tucked the cloak close to him at night, when he couldn't sleep without Simon's body next to him. Haunted by him in a way he knew he was helpless to endure.

And it was his fault, wasn't it?

Obligations had ripped him away with their dirty hands, and he found no fulfillment in the work as he pushed himself to the point of aching, waking every day with his muscles knotted and sore only to do it again. He plowed the fields and pulled the weeds and heaved the dirt and it all meant nothing. It meant nothing and John felt lifeless in all that he did. There was no meaning to it, not a lick of it without Simon and all he could do was add it to his pile of regrets.

Price tried to talk to him once, in the middle of the field with Alejandro and Rudy looking from the distance. Had nearly pleaded with him, as much as a man like Price could do, for him to take a break. It had fallen on deafened ears, and he had walked away with

his hands up to the sky and a shake of his head.

It wasn't long before he started drinking.

Anything to chase away the sorrow. His only solace once he had found it, spending his night late at the pub until Gaz would gently pry him out the door into the wee hours of the morning. He would stumble to his cottage, the place he no longer could consider home, and into a bed that wasn't *theirs*, and if dreams found him, Simon was waiting for him. Nightmares.

And so John stopped sleeping, if he could help it.

He was a right mess and he knew it, cultivated by his own hands and his own fault.

When the night would close in too close, suffocating him into a chokehold, he would imagine going back to Simon. Sometimes he imagined open arms, kisses across his cheeks and across his lips, sweet. Sometimes the door would remain closed. Sometimes Simon was just gone, no matter how long he waited, never to return.

Simon *haunted* him, his every waking thought, and John could only let him. His grief was a harrowing weight on his shoulders while he pitied himself, and he *hated* himself for it. His own damned fucking fault and he wished he could take it back. Wished it was as simple as packing his things and trekking his way back up that blasted mountain that he couldn't even look at anymore. Not without searching for a telltale smokestack that he knew he'd never find; A body descending from the trees that would never come.

He counted the days until he lost track of them, and then he counted again. Every day, warmer than the last, was another scar along his heart.

He missed him.

God, did he love him, but he missed him more. Because even if Simon were to never kiss him again, never hold him in his embrace, it did nothing for the thought of never seeing him again. Never hearing his voice. Never watching strong hands whittle away a new creation or stir their dinner. Never seeing the light of his eyes every time he told a horrid joke. His laugh. His smile.

John was ready now, to give it all away just for the sight of him, and yet he couldn't. He admitted his fault and pleaded with himself to just

go - Price would understand, Alejandro and Rudy and Gaz - They would all understand.

And yet he remained; Remained because he was a coward, and he knew it well.

-

John had lost count of the days again when Price sits down next to him, a pint of ale in his hands that he gently places down on the counter in front of him. He takes a strong sip, and John watches as he shoots Gaz a look, the bartender finishing up cleaning a glass and making himself scarce to the end of the bar. John knows what's coming, and he can only sigh into his own drink, waiting for Price to get his bearings.

"You gonna tell me what happened out there, boy?"

John doesn't answer him, just looks down into his murky reflection. He looked gaunt, in his amber mirror, a shadow of himself. Price had a right to be concerned when he looked like that.

He takes a hearty gulp anyway, and slams the glass back on the counter.

"Look. I'm not going to pretend I understand what you went through, but either you shape up or you spell it out. We can't help you if you don't tell us," Price says gently, running a hand across his mouth where foam sticks to his beard.

"My works been good," John bites back, annoyed to be having this conversation at all. Who cared what happened to John so long as he was useful?

"Your work's been concerning. Haven't heard you bitch once, you know that? Could have bought a new farm with a copper piece for every moan and groan you've given over the years. Now what happened?" Price settles firmly at his side, staring him down in that fatherly way of his.

John swallows down more of his pint, and then he breaks, like they both knew he would.

"I met someone, out in the mountains."

Price mulls his words over, his clever eyes putting together the pieces

in that quick-sharp mind of his.

“Had to be a hell of a woman,” He leans back to reach into his pocket, pulling out a cigar and tinder before he lights her up, taking a deep pull and savoring it before he nudges John in pass.

John takes it.

“He was, a hell of a man anyway,” John blows out with the smoke, not looking at Price as he confesses into the din of the bar. He knows Gaz is listening anyway, judging by the look he slots their way, but John knows they're in a safer place than any, although he expects Rudy and Alejandro to be at his door before sundown.

Price hums as he takes the cigar back from John. They sit in their heavy plume of silence, smoke dancing around them and encasing them in its heady scent. It's a long time before Price settles his elbows to the bar, staring past the bottles and shelves to somewhere far more distant.

“So what are you doing here then?” He finally asks, and John slots him a look.

“You know why I'm here,” He says slowly, because he knew Price did. He just didn't know what games he was playing.

“We'd do just fine without you,” Price supplies, taking another puff of his cigar.

“But -”

“Do you love him, son?” Price asks, finally giving him his full attention. His eyes are sad, when he looks at John, but knowing even before John can answer him.

John looks away, back into his dwindling pint.

“Aye,” He says quietly.

“Then I'll ask you again, what are you doing here?”

John contemplates his answer, and draws a blank with the invitation so clear. That it would be okay, to give up his duties. They would be alright without him.

“Is it really that easy, Price?” He asks softly, one more final plea to hear the words he so desperately needed. Just once more.

Price knocks back the rest of his pint, throwing a handful of copper pieces on the bar before he's standing, placing a heavy squeeze to John's shoulder.

"I think you need to ask yourself that," He says softly, and then he's gone.

-

Taking Price's words into consideration, John does ask himself.

What would be the harm, in at least going to see him? The journey was long, but if he got to see Simon again he would travel the earth a thousand times. He could find a balance, he knew he could, if Simon still would not follow him.

All that mattered was if Simon still kept him in his heart, the way that John had. If the time hadn't been too long now; If John's mistake didn't tear them apart.

He sits on the matter for a handful of days, antsy, flight in his bones as he comes to a decision.

He would go see Simon. Plead his forgiveness.

Tell him he loved him.

When he finally goes to tell Price his decision, Price has a knowing expression in his eyes and a smile on his face. A clap to John's shoulder as he gives him a good shake.

"Go get your man then, son."

Chapter End Notes

Can't believe next chapter is the final one!

I know this one is short, a little teaser for what's to come.

Originally it was all gonna be a bit longer but I cut some things for the sake of my sanity lmao.

I will try and get the next chappie written down as soon as possible for you all.

I let myself get overwhelmed with comments, so for the last chapter I didn't respond and I'm so sorry T_T but I read every single one with a warmth in my heart (and the offer of tissues) and even considered printing out and framing a few lmao. So just know you are loved endlessly and I have loved taking this journey

with you all <3 See you next chapter!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

John hikes up the mountain as fast his legs would take him, a flurry in his heart and a sweat beading his skin in the heat of early day. Even as his lungs heaved and his calves burned, his mind was nothing but the picture of Simon's face, his name a mantra.

All he could think about was the words he would say, ingrained on his tongue. He wishes he could shout it across the mountains, if only so Simon would hear him. To know he was coming for him. That he would chase him down if need be, travel for days just to hear his voice an echo in the trees. John was on his way and the prospect of seeing him again, knowing what he did now, swelled his heart with anticipation.

He weaves through the pine, whips around the oak, stumbles across rock and trudges through the dirt and foliage. He was a fury through the forest, as awful a racket as ever but there was nothing in his path that could stop him now. His only vision was of Simon.

To hold him, to spill the love from his heart. To *stay*. To have him day and night. To curl into his heavenly embrace and know he was loved in return. He was ready now, to give it all away. *Had* given it away - so carelessly - and now was on his way to *claim* him. Body and soul, if only he would have him.

The journey still takes him longer than he could withstand. He wishes that it would have been easy to bring a horse over the rocky tundra, if only so he could get there faster. Wishes the trail to Simon was a clear shot, instead of the weaving and winding he had to do, but he knows it will be worth it. Knows seeing Simon would be worth a thousand mountains, rivers, oceans. He would travel them all, so long as he knows Simon is at the end of them.

The sun is an orange hue on the horizon before the cabin comes into view, and John hooks on an oak at the sight of the small structure peak between the trees. A smoke plume carries on the slight breeze of the wind, and a grin splits between his cheeks as he comes to a stop for the first time all day. His chest gives a final, shuddering heave as he takes in a full breath. Calms the hectic beat of his heart as he takes

a slow step forward, and then another.

He was finally here.

He runs through his words again, now in the face of them, and a new anxiety takes place in his chest and limbs the closer he gets.

What if Simon didn't want to see him?

He shakes the negativity from his mind. Can't bear the thought even as he thinks it. He pushes it behind him, twisting his hands as he steps into the clearing, sidling up to the shed as he stares at the closed door.

What if he isn't there?

He waits for a sign of life, but none comes from the window. He switches from foot to foot as he dances in antsy anticipation. Now that he was here...well, all he could do was knock.

All he had to do was knock.

He bites into his lip as he takes a step forward, and then another. His feet slip along the gravel as he goes, and he stumbles just a bit, carrying his weight just that bit further.

He's about halfway to the door now, and it swims in his vision with its dark wood. Cotton branches crawling up his throat and budding and blooming across his tongue. His heart is a hammer in his chest where it beats with its staccato rhythm.

All he had to do was knock.

He raises his fist to the door, inhales, readies to bring his hand down across the wood.

But he doesn't get to.

The door whips open sharply.

Simon.

He stands in the doorway, eyes wide and his lips parted on stolen breath. John can see the moment his chest stops its rise. John wants to laugh, he wants to cry, he wants to kiss the breath right out of both of them.

Oh his *Simon*.

John looks up into his eyes, no words to be spared between them. Simon looked much like how John had felt all these days, dark circles below his eyes and a scruff along his chin. John knows he is in much of the same state and he wants to laugh at the both of them for being so fucking stupid.

“You came back,” Simon finally breathes, and John can see where his hands twitch in a raise and then abort the movement, fingers clenched into fists at his side.

So many words swim across John’s mind, so many things to say in the space between them now that he is here, but all that comes tumbling out of his mouth, all he can say is -

“I love you.”

Simon’s eyes widen impossibly further and that’s the last thing John can bear to see before John is stepping into his chest, wrapping his arms around his waist and pressing himself into Simon’s space. He feels tears prick at the back of his eyelids as he closes them, taking in that sweet smell of musk and pine that he had nearly forgotten the exact scent of.

“I’m sorry,” his voice breaks, tears brimming over now as Simon stands still in his hold. “I’m sorry - *Simon* - I never should have left.”

Simon doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and John’s heart breaks, nearly ready to beg on his knees in the miniscule amount of time it takes for Simon to respond.

“Are -” Simon’s voice stutters for a moment on a breath, his arms slowly coming to wrap around John’s weeping form as his head rests against the top of John’s own. “Are you real?”

The question jolts something inside John, and he pulls away with eyes open wide as he slips his hands from Simon’s waist, up and over his chest to cradle his face between his hands. Simon’s eyes search his own, brow furrowed in near grief and fear at the answer he awaits for.

“Yes,” John breathes, standing up on his toes to press a kiss to smooth out the line of his brow before falling back on the balls of his feet.

“Yes, Simon - baby - I’m *here*.”

He caresses the sharp cheekbone under his hands with his thumb, watches as Simon’s mouth opens and closes again. The swallow as his Adam’s apple bobs on unspoken words.

John doesn't wait for him.

He presses his lips against Simon's, putting behind it the pain he'd endured all these weeks without him. Kisses with a fervor, relishing when Simon moves against him in acceptance.

"I love you," He breathes between the slide of their lips, and then again, an 'I'm sorry' slipping in as tears track his cheeks. The taste of him, heavenly on his tongue, sweet in the back of his throat even as it knots and twists as a sob catches and hiccups into his mouth; Echoes between where they're joined together. John can't believe he'd ever given this up, can't imagine ever giving it away again.

And this time he wouldn't.

Simon finally seems to get his bearings because he grips John even closer in his hold, passion in every touch as he slides his hand up across John's back, settling into his hair as he presses them closer together.

They part for only a moment, a moment to catch their breaths and John can see the wetness that lines Simon's eyes, his face still a picture of disbelief. John kisses him again, and Simon melts into him, pulling him forwards as they back into the cabin, kicking the door closed behind them as they go.

There's an underlying heat now in the touches that grasp at John's skin, like now that Simon had him he was going to consume him whole. John could only let him. Helpless to every slide of his hands, every kiss he pressed to his mouth; The touch of him a fire to his flesh and bone, a branding with every sear.

"Johnny," Simon whispers against the corner of his mouth, his cheeks, tongue sliding out to taste the residual tears that had fallen, kissing across his face in near worship, every kiss a heavenly press after the other.

"Simon," John answers to the call of his name, softly, with all the love in his heart. He sighs into him, falling apart in his hold as Simon unravels him, touch by touch. His hands sliding up the back of John's shirt, fingers digging into the muscle as nails leave crescent indents. John whines into the feel of him, in the sharp and pleasant pain.

"Simon, please,"

John doesn't know what he asks for, only that he was asking. He

wanted Simon to kiss him, ravage him, take him in any way he would have him. All he knew was that close wasn't close enough, not with the distance that had separated them for so long.

Simon groans against him, reaching next to him to the shelves that line above the table. Something falls, shatters, and Simon murmurs a curse to his lips before he's pulling away to find whatever it is he's in search for. He grabs it, and just as soon as the object is in his fingers his mouth is back on John's, kissing him deeply as he tugs him forwards, into the direction of the pile of furs.

They fall into one another as they trip on the covers, John laughing as Simon curses again as he falls on top of him, whatever had been held in his palm falling off to the side with a rattle. John doesn't care, the weight above him is one he had spent nights *dreaming* of, only to awaken without that very weight beside him. John doesn't know where the line between earth and heaven is drawn, he only knows that somewhere between the doors threshold and here he had found it.

Simon's mouth finds his again, and John clings to him like he's a phantom on borrowed time, as though he would disappear at any moment. He very well could, John thought, if the touch of him wasn't so vivid, so anchoring, where they lay entangled in one another.

Simon moans, a delicious sensation against John's mouth that sings all the way down his spine and into his belly. Warmth radiates from every caress, every touch a new fever against his skin and he relishes in it, squirming beneath Simon as he tries to find a friction with his hips.

He finds it when Simon's knee slots between his legs, pressing his hardened cock against it with a whine. Simon chuckles deep into his mouth, as delighted it would seem as John was at their current development, if the answering hardness against his thigh was anything to go by.

Simon parts only to help them out of their shirts before he's pressing kisses to John's collarbone, suckling the skin and painting it red with little love bites as he goes. John writhes under him, grappling for any part of him just to hold him.

Eventually enough must be enough because Simon raises his head up to his ear, nipping the lobe as his hands find the waistband, tugging at them teasingly. "Can I?"

“Yes,” Anything. I love you.

Simon strips John slowly, leisurely, as if the heat inside John wasn't calling for him. The pants are thrown to the side, John's cock straining in the open air and Simon just sits back on his heels, staring at the whole length of him with pupils blown wide, like he still couldn't believe John was laid beneath him.

“Simon,” John calls to him softly, and it seems to snap him out of reverence as he comes crawling back to him to press a hasty kiss to his lips. His hand dips down to give John's dick a few teasing tugs before his hand is dipping lower, pressing against his entrance.

John jolts at the foreign feeling, and whines as his finger circles the rim, another teasing gesture and John takes a breath to steady the feeling within himself.

“Please,” He groans.

Simon kisses him firmly once before he reaches for what he had dropped earlier. A bottle filled with a near amber liquid. Oil.

He uncorks the bottle with his teeth, spitting the damned thing somewhere off to the side as he pours the oil over his fingers, dripping some on John's thighs as he gets it everywhere. The bottle is placed off somewhere with no care as to where it ends up before Simon is hovering back over him.

His hand, slick with oil now, goes back to fingering around his entrance, before he slides a single digit in. John squirms at the unfamiliar sensation, but brings Simon in for a sloppy kiss all the same. As his body gradually relaxes to the intrusion, Simon begins to steadily slip in another, a sting as he stretches him wider.

John keens under him, babbling useless nothings as Simon slowly pumps his fingers in and out of him. Simon pants against his mouth, undone, it would seem, just as much as John was.

He says his name like it's the only thing he knows, the only thing that exists in the world. All that exists was them were they lay, Simon steadily fucking him with his fingers and John a mess below him. Simon finds the spot that makes him cry out, a surprise for both of them as he presses the spot again, a new treasure found.

“Simon please,” John claws at him, hips bucking in search of some to aid his untouched cock.

"I've got you, love," Simon whispers back, ducking down to slide his tongue along his neck, slipping his fingers out of him to pull at his own waistband. John gets a full view of his dick as it springs free, just as hard as John's, precum smeared across the tip from where it had leaked.

He sits back to stroke himself a few times, coating it in the residual oil that still painted his hand. Simon throws his head back with a sigh and John goes dizzy at the sight; Of the beauty of him. The way his lips part on the pants that leave his mouth, the way his eyes close so that his blonde lashes fan across his cheeks.

He wanted him.

He's about to vocalize his impatience, just as Simon's eyes flutter back open and lock onto him. Simon smiles down at him, reading him like the open book he is before he's crossing the distance to kiss him sweetly.

No words are exchanged as Simon slides his dick down John's thighs, lower, until the head of his cock is pressing against his entrance, pushing in slowly, shallow.

John lets out a babble of curses at the intrusion, larger than the fingers had prepared him for but the pain sweet all the same. The deeper Simon goes the harder it seemed, for both of them. The act leaving them panting against each other in tandem.

"Fuck, love," Simon whines, eyes closed as he sinks in fully, anchoring there for an aching amount of time before he rocks his hips back just as slow. The motion he sets for them is gradual, a pleasant pace that does nothing for the hunger in John's belly. Even as the feel of him melts John into a pile of nothing, he wanted *more*.

John waits until he's pulled back before he snaps his hips up in his impatience, Simon cursing into his mouth at the motion, at the surprise of him. Reading into his movements Simon picks up the pace, fucking into him thoroughly just the way John had been waiting for.

His hand grips at John's thigh, fingers wrapped across them in bruising force, while the other snakes around to finally, finally grasp at John's leaking cock. John lets out a sinful breath, a moan as he finally gets the pleasure of Simon's hand on him. Simon fucks him to the beat of his fist and John can do nothing but throw his head back into the pillows, unwinding in the sweetest of ways.

There's a flush across Simon's chest, a deep pink against the white scars that cross his torso. John wants to taste them with his teeth, wants to map them with his tongue. He licks into Simon's mouth instead, and receives a pleasant hum in return.

Neither of them are in a state to last very long, not with their impatience and vigor. John was close before Simon had even slipped into him, and he knows he can do nothing to hold back when the moment comes.

"M' close," He gives the warning, grappling his hold on Simon as the sensation builds.

Simon doesn't answer him, simply rocks against him, into him with an increased urgency. He pants along John's neck, biting into the skin where close isn't close enough. He whines through his teeth, the sound sending a ripple through John's chest.

"I love you," Simon suddenly says, and John twists his head to kiss the words out of his mouth, to swallow them. Taste them. Breathe them in. He cums in Simon's hand just as Simon reaches his own climax with a groan.

Simon falls against him, spent of his earlier urgency and nuzzling into the crook of John's neck, lying there with nothing but a groan as his spent cock slips out of him. John presses a lazy kiss to his forehead, tired and fucked. He hadn't intended for them to wind up here of all places, a lot left unsaid in the afterglow. He fights to keep his eyes open even as his mind is still a whirlwind. They still needed to talk, even if now half of his worries could easily be cast aside.

Simon rolls partially off of him with no indication of moving anywhere else any time soon. John smiles as he feels the press of Simon's lips to his neck, and he giggles, contentment and happiness engulfing him in a tight hold.

"I love you," He sighs.

Simon hums against his skin. "I love you too," He says softly.

John feels his heart swell at the words. For as much as he could never get tired of saying it, he doesn't think he'll ever tire of hearing it either. Can imagine a lifetime of those words, even if they only have the present.

"I'm sorry, for leaving like I did," He murmurs. It was a conversation

that needed to be had. He knew he had hurt the both of them so carelessly, even though his heart and duty had been in the right spot when he had.

"No," Simon shakes his head, moving to prop himself up on his elbow as he places a kiss to the corner of John's mouth. "I should have gone with you."

"I - what?" John says, eyes wide as his mind catches up with the words. He hadn't expected that to be his reply, of all things, and he stares up at him even if Simon isn't returning his gaze.

Simon traces lazy patterns against his chest, right over the center where his heart lies.

"I thought of it every day since you left," he begins. "I just - I couldn't," He makes an aborted sound of frustration. "People are cruel, Johnny. They wouldn't understand, but I thought -"

"Hold on, Simon," John reaches to stroke a hand down his own face. "You thought the village would mind?"

"I - well - yes -"

"Oh, Simon," He smiles. "I'm sure half of them already know."

Simon's face pales. "You told them?"

John scoffs. "I told Price, and I'm sure Gaz overheard. Which means Rudy and Alejandro already know, which means -"

"And it's...okay?"

"Oh, love. I'm pretty sure there's a betting pool on how fast I come back with my tail between my legs."

Simon blinks at him, like he doesn't understand the words coming out of John's mouth for the poor life of him. John leans up to kiss the stunned look off his face. As endearing as it was, it had no place here.

"So you'll have me? If I come with you?"

John kisses him again, as sweet as can be.

"Simon, I would love nothing more."

They spend the night entangled in each other, trading tender kisses with lazy abandon, as if they had all the time in the world.

But morning comes all the same and they rise together, packing a handful of Simon's things into a makeshift knapsack. There isn't much and John has to assure him several times that he had certain things back at his cottage, that he would provide for him all the things he needed that they couldn't take.

He can see the underlying nerves of Simon's tension, where it rests in his shoulders like he's holding the weight of the world. Softly, he pulls Simon into an embrace, burrowing his head into his neck as he takes a moment to calm them both.

"We can always come back," He whispers quietly. "If it ever gets to be too much."

Simon slowly wraps his arms around him, nodding his head as he rests it against John's. "I'm just - it's been a long time Johnny."

John kisses his shoulder in understanding. "We'll get through it, yeah?"

He can't see it from where Simon is settled against him, but he knows well enough to tell that there's a small smile from his tone.

"Yeah."

-

With everything packed and the cabin looking a little more empty than normal, John heaves the knapsack over his shoulder, swatting away Simon's hand when he goes to take it from him with a grin.

"Ye all set?" John asks as he watches Simon take a cursory look around the room. He lets him savor the moment, the change of it. He knows Simon will find his place in the village with the lot of them, and knows how momentous the occasion will be. He will have to warn the others to take it slow with him with how he knows they will be. Ravenous as the wolves, to get their hands on Simon, just how they had been with John the moment he arrived to settle. He smiles. He'd have to warn Simon too, but they had enough time on their journey for that conversation.

"One last thing," Simon mutters, walking over to the bedside where the mask lay on the floor. He picks it up, running his hands along the

wooden creation as he looks down upon it almost sadly. John still didn't know the story behind why he kept the mask, why he had ever worn it in the first place, but he was content to wait out the story. He didn't mind Simon's secrets.

"Ye could bring it, if ye like." He says. If it brought that much comfort to Simon, he could bring anything, no matter how heavy or light.

"No," Simon says, walking slowly across the room, eyes flitting around the carving. Instead, he places the mask gently next to John's whittled lion, propping it gently against the wall on the shelf. "It's time to let some things go."

John sidles up next to him, taking in the mask himself and the small lion. He places his free hand on Simon's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. Simon reaches to place his hand on John's, anchoring it there for just a moment.

John waits him out, letting him find peace in who knows how many years. Simon says nothing, and John doesn't ask.

Before long, Simon is turning away, facing John with a new light in his eyes. He leans in to press a kiss against John's cheek, before he's slotting his hand in John's, threading their fingers and pressing them palm to palm.

"Together, then?" He asks.

John smiles, raising their entwined hands to press his lips to them.

"Together."

Chapter End Notes

And finished <3 Thank you to everyone for sticking with me on this journey.

I'll be taking a nice break from writing now lmao. But I hope to have more projects for you all in the future.

I love each and every one of you <3 Thank you again for such a kind reception to their story. :)

See ya'll on the flip side.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!